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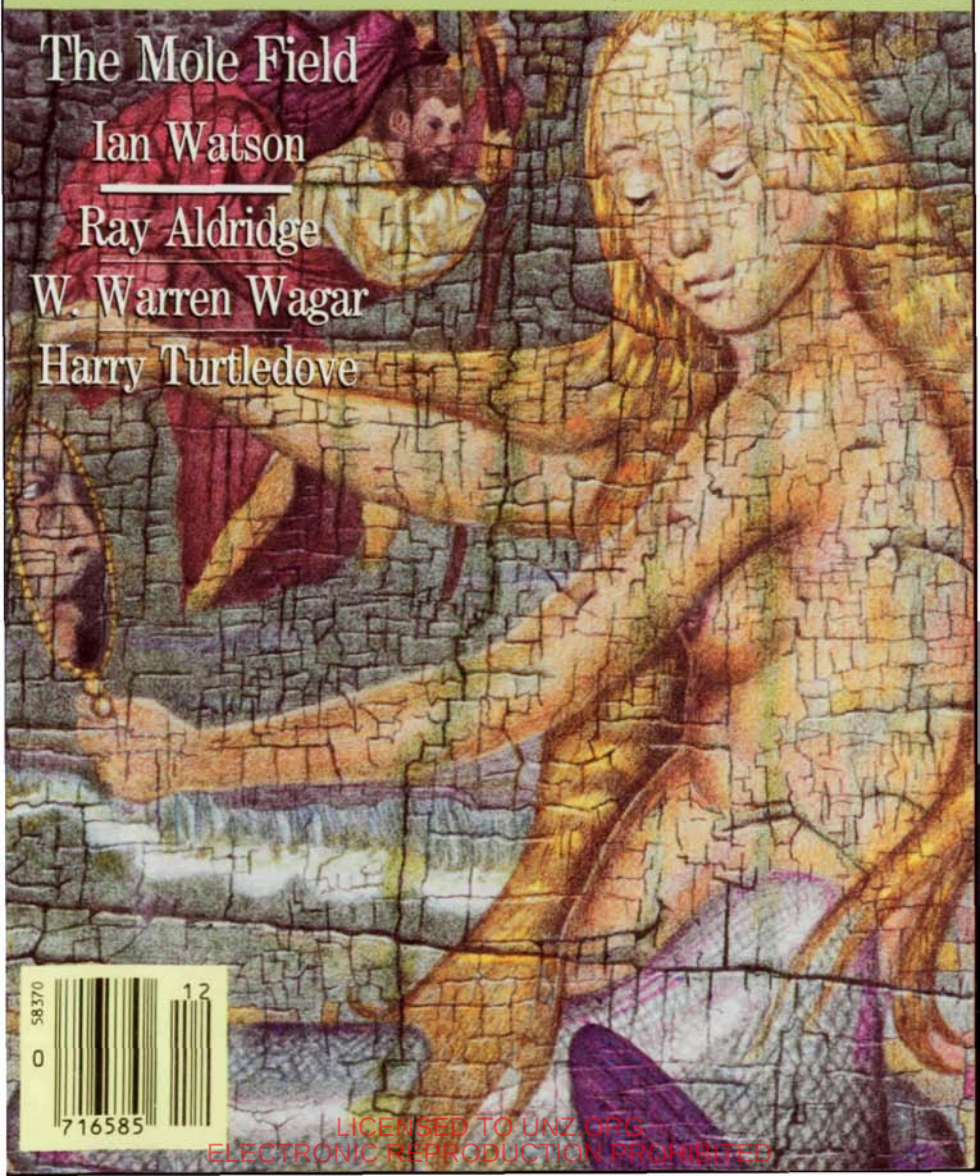

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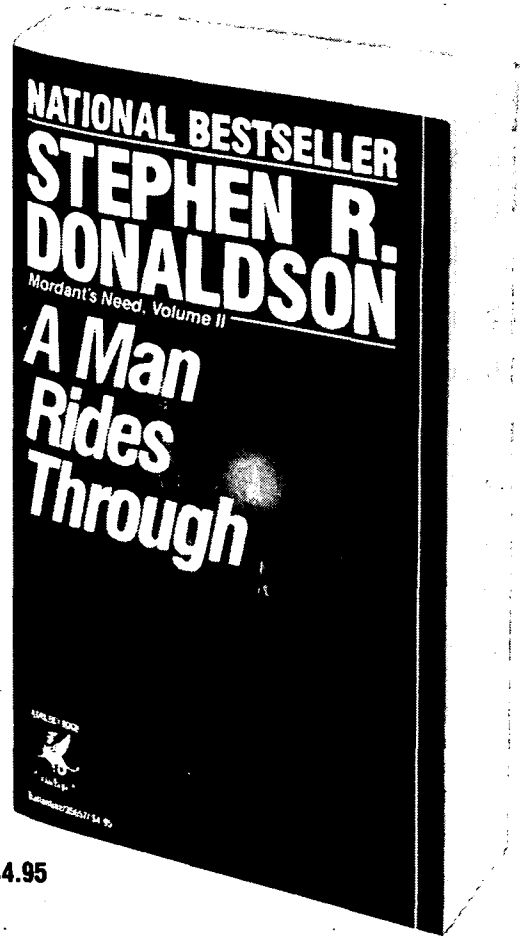

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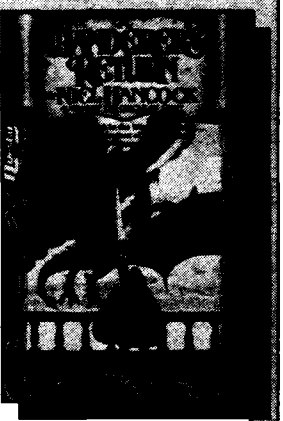

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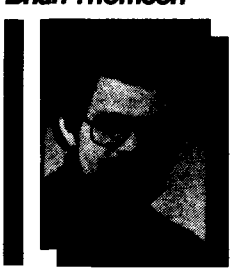

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Dragons, on the other hand, have a much longer lineage. Back in the days of Beowulf, dragons were fearful foes waiting to be slain by the bravest of warriors. Through the years we have seen reluctant dragons, fire-breathing dragons, dragons who read poetry, and even ones from outer space. Whether by magic or myth or imaginative fantasy, dragons have also made their presence felt.

I hope you enjoy Barry Longyear's robots and Niel Hancock's dragons (I know I have!).

When you see me around be sure to ask me what's doing on the planet Nualia.

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Ian Watson's latest contribution concerns a horror novelist who searches for inspiration in the wall paintings of a country church and instead finds something terrifyingly different . . .

The Mole Field

By Ian Watson

"THAT'S THE CHURCH up there!" exclaimed Ruth.

Squat tower and red-tiled roof peered over the brow of the hill. Like a stooping grandfather, the building looked shrunken by age. The Cross of Saint George fluttered on a flagpole. This was New Year's Day, so she could understand a flag being flown, but why was it at half-mast? Was the village in mourning for the death of the old year, grieving for the past?

"The sign says *Chapel* Lane," said Alan.

"Yes, and the other road was Church Lane, but it didn't lead anywhere, did it?" Only to a cul-de-sac of bungalows and a few parked cars.

Maybe they ought to have left their Metro and followed the field path behind a stand of trees, but a low, gusty gray sky was distributing a chilly gruel of drizzle. Amazing that in such a tiny village as Pritwell, you could lose the church. Surely there was vehicle access somewhere? Yet Pritwell itself was well lost down a twisty minor road cloaked in trees. Not a

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soul in sight; people would be nursing their hangovers.

They had been told about Pritwell by a lively Yugoslav woman whom they met at a pre-Christmas party. Dana and her husband Bill had lived in Pritwell some ten years earlier, though they didn't stay too long. "An evil place," Dana said. "There's no pub," Bill commented. According to Dana, the village had housed an old woman, now dead, who practiced witchcraft. She made wax dolls of her enemies and stuck pins into these inside the church, where she supposedly held black-magic ceremonies. The little church also boasted some peculiar medieval wall paintings.

Dana never explained how the old woman was able to use the church for devilry if her antics were well known, unless everyone in the village, vicar included, was either terrified of her or else an accomplice. Dana and Bill seemed neither. Perhaps Dana was spinning Alan a mischievous yarn, knowing that he was a writer of horror novels. She certainly sparked his interest — in those wall paintings. Precious few frescoes survived in English churches. That was because they were viewed as popish during the Reformation. If they survived the sixteenth-century zeal for whitewash, a hundred years later they ran the gauntlet of the Puritans. Pritwell was safely off the beaten track.

Alan turned the car up narrow Chapel Lane, and, sure enough, they soon passed a Methodist chapel built of red brick with corrugated-iron roof, before coming to a cattle grid. The potholed road beyond led through tussocky, muddy pastures grazed by Friesians and studded with brown mole heaps, round to a manor house and farm. At the bend in the road was the church gate, a rickety, in-and-out affair secured by a loop of blue baling twine. A patch of stones and mud outside the gate provided a single parking bay. A narrow, wire-fenced path led away past trees that sheltered the graveyard, no doubt emerging at the top of Church Lane. That must be the route to church for most parishioners.

The gate was a tight squeeze.

"Wonder how they get coffins into the graveyard?" mused Alan. "Probably don't anymore. Cremate them in town." He read off the dates on some nearby gravestones, which were all small, canted, weatherworn, and lapped by long, wet grass. Eighteen hundreds, some seventeen hundreds. "Wonder if *she's* buried here? Dana's witch? That looks a newish stone over there. And fresh earth. Hmm, after ten years? Must be moles. Never mind her. Don't want to get our shoes soaked." And his fawn corduroy

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jeans, and her long russet tweed skirt. "Let's see those frescoes."

"Alan."

"What is it, Ruthie?"

He must have mistaken the angle of her pointing.

"That's just a death's-head, carved over the porch."

"No, higher. Look at the way the flag's blowing. Look at the weathercock; it's facing in a different direction."

"Must be stuck. Hey Ruthie, let's not *scare* ourselves." He winked, and added, "Prematurely."

Yes, he was going into the church to scare himself. Like a kid. Alan hoped to psych himself up into an idea, an inspiration; but it should be nothing to do with Dana's witch, which was a banal idea. Wax dolls and magic; blah. The wall paintings, on the other hand, had sounded heretical the way that Dana described them.

Ruth suspected that the frescoes might simply turn out to be badly drawn, daubs produced by peasants whose only knowledge was of the Bible read to them from the pulpit week after week. Yet Alan might suss out something about Templars and unholy grails, or pagan practices and conspiracy, the sort of subterranean conspiracy that burrows through the underground of history from its starting point in something (pause for effect) *inhuman*, some alien power on earth that nourishes itself on sacrifice, on torment and corruption, as worms feeding on a corpse, soon to be the corpse of civilization. She knew the keynotes by heart; and her heart was just a little sick of them.

Alan originally had written crime novels. However, the clear logic by which corruption, murder, rape, mutilation were resolved and justice done, social sanity restored by rational thought and compassionate dedication — even if his detective was an oddball with a personal grief, operating in a world gone awry with greed — this meaningful weaving back together of a finite number of broken threads, this reassembly of a shattered jigsaw into a completely revealing picture, began to pall on him. Perhaps this was because his crime books hadn't done as well as they might have. Well enough, but not *well*. Thus he became a little sick inside, at the same time as he began spooking himself with mysteries that had no sane resolution, because the key to them was terror, not detection; with crimes that couldn't be solved, because their real perpetrators lurked in some other dimension, and were unhuman.

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SPECTRA BANTAM

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More: Alan did not so much feed upon these later books — though he and Ruth fed more adequately than before — as the books fed on him. He seemed jaunty and rational enough, yet Ruth noted his occasional flares of temper that were not exactly directed at her so much as were undirected anger seeking a focus. These days, too, Alan's sex life must be occurring largely in his head, since it had almost ceased happening in bed; and into his books spilled some brutal, kinky fantasies that she preferred not to think too much about. "Necessary ingredients," he had growled at her; *she* wasn't involved in them.

He was festering inside, rottening instead of ripening, though to all appearances the skin of the apple was still bright and firm. Alan, her apple, still freshly complexioned, though beginning to blotch with the assistance of a little too much booze. Still passably slim, though his flesh was filling out. Still with most of his fair, curly hair. The apple tasted less of a crisp, sharp, acid-sweet enlightenment; more of dark and hidden, hurtful things, of bruises and rot in the inner core of him. Yet by and large he was still her old Alan — just as she was still his Ruthie, leaving her youth behind and childless now perhaps forever, though not yet abandoning her sweet looks or her long, never-hacked auburn hair.

She didn't wish to squeeze the apple too tightly . . . in case it burst. Being apprehensive, she saw signs where he ignored them — such as that weathercock and the flag at odds — and perhaps she saw the wrong signs rather than the subtler, awful ones.

The little old church, St. Botolph's, was so gloomy within as to resemble a crypt. A maroon blanket, acting as a great shaggy draft excluder, shrouded the inside of the oak door, with a raggy slit through which to reach the latch that had already clicked home. The fibers strove to knit together, a wound closing. To leave, she or Alan would need to slide their hand through that wound, opening it, groping behind for the hidden metal that they couldn't see and must take on trust. If it was she, she feared that something else might touch her hand.

Limbs of unidentifiable monster figures loomed in red-and-black outline from the leprous, plastered walls. A framed, typed history that hung alongside the door was unreadable until Alan flared his cigarette lighter like a monk holding up a candle.

Ruth shivered. "God, it's cold in here."

"Always is, in churches," he remarked while speed-reading to himself.

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"They point to sunny skies, but they're rooted in the clay. A church is a stone tooth in the jawbone of the ground. That's why the cold bites. The toothache of antiquity, the twinges of time. A church gets you ready for your coffin."

He skipped away from the framed text to circuit the church, staring up at the partial figures that now seemed to Ruth more definite, as if they were emerging from the plasterwork, rising to the surface. Of course her eyes were simply accommodating to dimness.

She noticed a bank of switches lurking on the other side of the draft shroud, and hit them all. Instantly, St. Botolph's flooded with radiance from a dozen spotlights mounted around the tops of the walls, angled mainly at the frescoes . . . which stepped out, fully visible. Startled by the sudden illumination, Alan cried incoherently.

"Let there be light," Ruth said hopefully. "Sorry I didn't warn you. Sorry, Alan!"

"Let there be darkness," he retorted.

Was he asking — telling — her to turn the spotlight off again? Her hand fluttered by the switches, unwilling to rob herself of the bright clarity, the dispelling shadows. The soft, hairy wound in the door blanket was only a simple hole, a letter box through which she could see part of the iron latch. Had the cut been made with a knife or scissors? Why hadn't the edges been bound and stitched?

After a few moments of silence, Alan went on. "'And God said, "Let there be darkness": and there was darkness. And people dwelt in darkness like a race of troglodytes, except for fires that they lit to huddle by. And God strode about in the darkness where his terrible face could not be seen, but they heard the thunder of his footsteps and believed in him strongly, more so than if he had created light.' How does that sound, Ruthie?"

"Horrible. Scary."

"The words of the Bible of Darkness, the Black Bible."

"Which you invented just now?"

He chuckled. "May as well eyeball these frescoes properly while the lights are on, eh?"

While they're on. . . . Ruth glanced up at the roof, a vault of long planks, white paint flaking from them. She remembered the red tiles, and for a moment this seemed to be a different building inside than it was outside.

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Of course the tiles were mounted upon the top side of those planks.

Large parts of the frescoes were blank, as if amputated. Patches of plaster, painted and unpainted, were lifting like a skin disease.

"According to the bumf," he said, "some Victorians tried to restore the walls, but they covered them with wax as a protection to keep the dirt off; so the damp couldn't escape."

"The damp," she murmured.

"Rising from the soil below. So an appeal fund was launched ten years ago. That would be when Dana was living here. A proper restorer removed the wax and dirt with chemicals, fixed back flakes of paint with lime and skimmed milk, filled holes with lime and paint to match."

The job looked to have been abandoned midway.

Ruth said, "That's when the witch was supposed to be up to her hanky-panky in here." Once again she suspected that she was in a different building, as if the church possessed two possible states of being — as indeed it did: the light and the dark. That draft shroud, a robe of coarse weave with a rent in it as though a spear had been stabbed through, could have been an old, poor woman's cloak.

Together they toured the shabby, ancient picture gallery.

"Once, all these surfaces were crowded with pictures," he said. "Even pictures painted over pictures."

Few survived. A patchy Last Judgment showed souls being weighed. In the Lady Chapel, Saint Eloi, the patron of blacksmiths, was shoeing a restless horse by the miraculous expedient of removing its leg to work upon separately. Largest, almost the height of the nave wall, was a Saint Christopher wading through a stream with a toddler Christ on his shoulder. The saint's staff was a crudely lopped tree; thus he seemed to be a fairy-tale ogre. Big fish butted at his feet.

"Now, here we are!"

Resting askew in the water upon her forked, scaly tail, a small mermaid admired herself, mirror in one hand, comb in the other tugging at her long tresses.

"Isn't it weird, Ruthie? Wherever could the rural peasants have got the idea for a mermaid? From the local stream? The Pritelwell, 'babbling brook' in Old English."

"I suppose she's vanity," said Ruth. "A sin. The saint wades by — and she misses seeing Jesus because she's intent on her face."

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"*Is* she, indeed? The reflected face is watching her, sure enough. Her own eyes are downcast. That isn't her face in the looking glass. Someone else is looking out at her, pleading."

Ruth tried to make out the true bearing of the mermaid's black pupils; however, the paint was a mess.

"I think it's a *man's* face, don't you? The prisoner in the mirror!"

No, she didn't think so. Yet, obviously he wished to believe this. His fingers strayed toward the crudely fashioned mermaid, altered course toward the painted mirror she held out.

"The state this plaster's in, I could probably peel the mirror face off and take it away. Break his enchantment. . . ."

"That's vandalism, Alan."

"Nobody has scrawled any graffiti on these walls — for hundreds of years. It's as if they're waiting to be written on, filled up again. I feel we should *do* something here, Ruthie. If we do something, something might happen." He strode toward the maroon shroud and doused the lights. Thick gloom swallowed the church. Dark shadows dropped about her like a host of bats. His figure, returning, was faceless.

No, she could see his features, his expression. Oh God, thought Ruth.

"We could fuck," he suggested. "Up against this wall, as if we're in God's bus shelter. God of Darkness, of course."

"You're just imagining, aren't you? Improvising?"

His knuckles rubbed the front of her skirt. "Don't you remember how we first did it?" he whispered. He was avoiding the word *love*. Something was rising in him — something obvious, but also something deeper and softer, soft as rot.

"Yes," she admitted. A tipsy, crowded party at a friend's flat almost twenty years ago, standing room only; likewise in the bolted toilet where she and Alan had crushed together, unzipping jeans feverishly, he crouching to thrust upward, she arching her legs to admit him. Awkward and uncomfortable; though they hadn't complained at the time. But neither had they repeated the position since. Perhaps, she thought, she should cooperate in this fantasy — this reenactment — or else he might retreat entirely inside his own head.

"The tunnel of love," he muttered, pressing her. "Let's open the tunnel, the dark, tight, hot, earthy tunnel."

"It's freezing in here, Alan."

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"We won't notice that. Haul up your skirt. Take your knickers right off; I'll pocket them. Wrap your skirt around us both; it's huge."

She gazed past him at the dark red lips of the gash in the door shroud. The iron teeth behind would rattle if anyone came, giving them brief warning. Blasphemous? she wondered. Then: Don't be so inhibited. Excitement quickened her.

"I'll get a story out of it," he promised. "Maybe the start of a novel. If we don't, I'll have to tear that plaster mirror off the wall." As if to blackmail her into obedience, like some little boy insisting on a game of doctor and nurse. He was unzipping, staring over her shoulder at the mermaid. His fingertips combed Ruth's hair. He was ready.

She did as directed. As she was pressed against the wall by his weight, she wondered whether the age-old plaster would crack and collapse in chunks; but it didn't. To her surprise, she enjoyed herself, and him, wetly, excitedly.

HE WAS jubilant.

"Now we've really done something, Ruthie! Didn't hurt anyone, did we? Imagine all their peasant faces if they could have looked through a time tunnel five hundred years into the future! Whiskers and gap-teeth, cysts and carbuncles on their weather-beaten cheeks. Smocks, and forelocks to tug to the lord of the manor and the vicar. Imagine Gaffer Giles painting a mirror on the wall with his very own face in it, thinking to himself, 'Happen oy be able to zee owt of it one day.' And what does he see but the mermaid coming to life, hoisting up her tail, and showing her loins at last? Hah, what the gaffer saw! He'd go goggle-eyed. Or maybe he wouldn't. That was life back then: copulating, and birthing, and all the earthiness of it. Come on, let's go. Let's find a pub."

At the curtain, Ruth hesitated briefly before sticking her fingers through the hole. Her fingers closed on a latch; the latch rose, and the door obligingly swung open. When they left the little porch, with its other mesh door to keep birds out of the church, the morning was as gray-grim as dusk, the air dense with turbulent moisture. Drizzle was so tossed around by the wind that you couldn't be sure it was actually raining, just that the air was very wet. Over the way there seemed to Ruth to be many more little heaps of fresh earth than earlier; and the Friesians had moved

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in a bunch to the far end of the pasture. Somehow the two facts scared her, though the cows were nowhere near and she was soon inside the car.

She pointed out her double observation to Alan as he started the engine and flipped on the wipers.

"Those aren't mole*hills*," he said airily. "A hill is the nest, the buried fortress. Those are called 'heaves': the soil excavated from new runs. Little buggers must be having a field day, with all this winter wetness softening the ground for them."

"Don't they hibernate?" she asked.

"No. Moles are hyperactive. Keep one without food for a few hours, and it starves to death. Got to keep on gobbling worms."

"Worms from the rotted coffins," she muttered.

"Hey, I like it! Bet we two had more fun digging than they do, eh? Loved it, didn't you? Admit it! I know you did. I'm going to write a bloody good chapter. I feel it in my bones."

"It's so long," she said.

He giggled and nudged her. "Do you mean my . . . ? Ah no, you mean since we last—" His face clouded angrily.

"I mean since your peasants went into the ground. All those years ago. How long does it take a coffin to rot? Or would they just wrap poor people's bodies in sackcloth?"

He reversed a short distance, then went into first gear, hauling the wheel to full lock. He would have to mount the grass by a full car's length before backing, thus to point them down the tarmac toward Chapel Lane. The wipers swished.

"Don't drive onto there!" Not amongst the mole heaves.

"How else can we get turned round?"

"Drive to the farm; it'll have a concrete yard."

"Some farmers are pretty sticky about disease precautions. Could take exception, with a shotgun. Don't worry! We won't get stuck." Alan steered the Metro forward all the way onto the pasture.

For the few seconds during which he was changing into reverse, Ruth believed that they were all right. But before he could lift his foot from the clutch pedal, the car slumped. Instantly, Alan was revving furiously. Mud sprayed out ahead. The car wasn't moving anywhere.

Yes, it was. Slowly but surely the Metro was sinking under its own weight like a punctured cabin cruiser into a lake.

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"Christ!" Alan quit revving, tried to open his door. Already the tide of soil was high enough to hold the door shut. He panicked momentarily. "It's a bog! Quicksand, quicksoil."

"It wasn't before," Ruth said tightly. "Or they wouldn't keep cows here. All the moles have undermined it, moles that eat the worms, ever-starving moles —"

"Shut up! We'll stop sinking in a moment. The car floor'll hold us up. A tractor can tug us out."

Instead, the car sank much faster. Soon soil engulfted the bonnet and bubbled up along the windows: the finest soil, sifted and sieved and friable. Gasping, Ruth clutched at her window handle.

"No!" cried Alan. "You'll let the stuff in!"

Struggling to clear the dirt, the wiper blades stalled. The wiper motor whined, screeched; something snapped. Recollecting, Alan cut the engine. The soil level rose higher. Before long he had to switch on the interior lights.

Presently, the last gray line of daylight was swallowed. Millions of crumbs of soil were packed against the windows, rolling upward. Beetles squirmed, disoriented. A fat worm wriggled across the glass beside Ruth. By now the roof must be submerged.

Had they come to rest at last? Hard to tell, but perhaps. Now that they were buried and hidden away, why should they sink any deeper?

"I think we've stopped," said Alan. "Here's what we'll do. We'll both climb into the backseat, open a window, and burrow our way out."

"Open a window, *now*!"

"If we stay in here, we'll asphyxiate."

"We will?" She started to pant.

"Not yet — sooner or later. Oh sure, some air must filter down. But we can't stay here. Climb over first, Ruthie. Please! The wheel's in my way."

Ruth screamed. For something else was burrowing. Miniature hands scraped against the glass, next to her head: hands with claws, pink palms shaped like shovels. Soil flew away. She recoiled, hardly seeing, as a whiskery snout butted the glass, then withdrew several inches. Beyond the dark, velvety body, a tunnel led away, faintly lit by the light from the car.

Another mole butted the window near Alan; another tunnel stretched back into obscurity. The mole was a cylinder of fur with no neck.

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However, it had a face. Moles shouldn't have faces. Not to speak of. Moles' eyes are so small, you can hardly notice them sunk in the fur. Moles' ears are only a hole in the skin.

These moles — there were others now — had the miniature faces of men and women. Old men and women. With grizzled whiskers, with warts and cysts, gap-toothed, bleary-eyed.

The eyes were peering into the car as the strong little spade hands beat on the glass.

Dreams in Tandem

We leap and dance and sleep
In tandem, you and I,
Dreamer within dreamer within dream.
You stretch my rib
And think it is the Earth,
Regard the race and rush of blood
And think it is the sea
Or your own cradle song,
While I perceive the spinning stars
As lanterns hung on velvet
Or the souls of fireflies.
We think in tandem, you and I,
"They rise for me, they wait for me."
Dreamer within dreamer within dream.

— NANCY ETCHEMENDY

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

Koko. Peter Straub. Dutton, $19.95

. . . and related matters

DEFINING THE purview of speculative fiction was a relatively easy task until the horror genre appeared. It's all been a muddle since, but now, thanks to Peter Straub's new book, perhaps we can untangle some of it.

For many pages, *Koko* appears to be a rather straight slasher novel. But then it veers, and how it veers is where the crux of this discussion occurs.

Even after the rise of Stephen King, it was still possible for commentators like me to cling to the notion that there were just four kinds of writing: Journalism, descriptive ("mainstream") fiction, an as yet unnamed mode containing the works of Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, and their disciples, and speculative fiction. Speculative fiction was definable as a literature — not a genre — containing "science fiction and fantasy."

The quotes right up there are markers around a hidden assumption. The assumption is that everyone understands what is meant by them is fiction that directly offers explanations for how things work in the Universe. Therefore, the irrealities of Borgesian fiction fall outside that classification, since one of the hallmarks of Borges's work is that outré things like the Universal Library just *are*: paradoxical intellectual concepts given a convincing physical reality but without any attempt to make them fit with the known Universe. All the characters accept them as they are, and soon the reader, too, has accepted them and thus experiences concrete events while in an abstract setting.

This would seem to be clearly beyond the reach of John W. Campbell's literature. And that's significant to me because I got to the idea that science fiction and fantasy were essentially identical while wondering how it was that *Astounding Science Fiction*'s editor, vaunted

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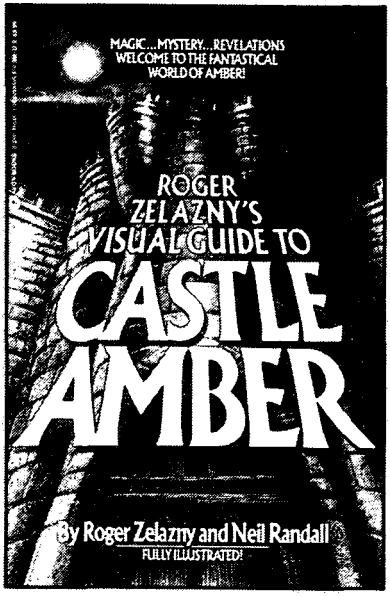

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technophile, could also have been the founding editor of the fantasy style embodied in *Unknown*. More, many of the authors now simply associated with *ASF* and its (not accurately) reputed dedication to hard-wired tales were originally attracted to Campbell's aegis by *Unknown*. And it seemed very unlikely to me that so many of them could write both kinds of fiction so well, unless the kinds were conceptually the same.

Pro writers often can produce acceptable work across a wide range of modes, but not continually and easily, not with the same evident joy as is found in their chief *metier*. Before they are professionals, writers are people, and become writers because of something in particular that has happened in their minds as people. Those who endure over any considerable time are artists, and the essence of art is a proposed individual view of reality; there are things a pro would *rather* do, and it still seems useful to assume that if a mature artist continually does a number of seemingly distinct things, the distinctions are not basic.

Well, then, how does one explain Stephen King's range of apparently quite different modes, or Ramsey Campbell's ability to produce a powerful outright nonspeculative slasher novel in *The Face That Must Die*, or Robert Bloch's in *Psycho*, or the career of Peter Straub?

Straub is reputed to have begun as a promising "serious" novelist. That's another one of those terms full of assumptions, including the pernicious ones that descriptive fiction is the superior literature and that the average practitioner of descriptive fiction is of a more elevated talent and sensibility than the average practitioner of other forms of writing.* Certainly, in some respects it doesn't matter whether a particular writer actually shares any of the assumptions; simply by declaring to play within the descriptive fiction arena, the writer has those assumptions made about him.

So the Establishment assumption is made that in opting to stop doing that and to then produce frank fantasy-horror novels such as *Floating Dragon*, and in collaborating with Stephen King on *The Talisman*, Straub was going after the money, and dropping down in the seriousness of his work. And now, in *Koko*, we have a novel about crazed Viet Nam veterans who once committed atrocities, with one of

**With the partial exception of the Borgeses, who are seen by "the Establishment" as brilliant or at least correctly ambitious surrealists . . . freaks, but impressive freaks.*

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them apparently not having stopped.

Set in the present day, Straub's novel offers a principal cast composed of surviving members of a platoon that did something very much like My Lai. One of the survivors, their Lieutenant, was court-martialled in connection with it, but acquitted. The exact details of the atrocity are not given initially. There are continual references to it in the flashback scenes that occur frequently as the text unrolls, and the reader of this ostensible "thriller" (The publisher's PR department has classified it that way) can rest content in the knowledge that the author is paying out clues to a climax in which the horrifying actuality will be brought completely onstage.

That Lieutenant is now a downtown Manhattan big-time lawyer; other members of his unit are a Chinatown restaurateur, an exurbanite pediatrician, an odd-job carpenter with a serious drinking problem, and an expatriate crime-novelist who is now in Singapore, or Taipei, or Bangkok, and communicates with the world only through a post-office box and a Chinese lawyer, if then. And at first most of them seem rather stable, especially Dr. Michael Poole, the principal viewpoint character.

Their opening problem is that they quickly see convincing evidence that Timothy Underhill, the novelist, has never quite given up the habit of taking an ear and gouging out the eyes, and leaving a playing card in the dead victim's mouth. This is a "Koko" card. Originally, the deck was one with the regimental insignia of a rearing elephant on it, and though none of them is quite sure what "Koko" means, there is no doubt that only this one small group ever developed this particular ritual. In Straub's Nam — convincingly like the Nam one normally pictures — things were done because they were done, and a symbolic act could become institutionalized without anyone inquiring into how it originated or who began it. Only later in the book does Straub begin to show us a tortuous connection to the canon of Babar The Elephant.

Now here we have moved into the domain of what psychology texts refer to as "phantasie" — the hidden inner world of unclear significances but iron laws that, when expressed in compulsive acts, is called ritual magic, or, alternatively, psychosis. And by the end of the book, Straub has moved deep into this, with a thoroughness that would have met with exasperated tolerance from Freud and sheer delight from Jung.

And that brings us to Howard P. Lovecraft.

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Lovecraft's great literary invention was in his use of an ancient Greek dramatic concept . . . that the world of humankind is totally subject to the whims of supernatural beings. The Universe belongs to the gods, operates in accord with a system so unknowingly complex that one cannot tell the difference between rationality and caprice, and the human view of the Universe is forever a sham. What Lovecraft did with this was to throw aside the Greek and Roman mythologies, in which the intrusions of the gods were usually offhand and as apt to be benign, or at least whimsical, as they were apt to be fatal or torturous to their human victims. For this he substituted the Cthulhu Mythos, derived with reference to Arabic myths — which are quasi-Oriental — in which the real proprietors of the Universe are tirelessly malevolent and perpetually apt to break through into human "reality" and rend their victims horribly.

Because he never accepted contemporary pulp plotting, which derives from the modern adoption of a cause-and-effect Universe and is reinforced by the Judeo-Christian ethos, Lovecraft could not make a success of his career. He was offering all color and little meaning, as the mass audience had been trained to understand meaning, and so his disciples — Bloch, Sturgeon, Kuttner, Bradbury — who were more flexible, were able to produce work that found much broader audiences. And success along that line encouraged them to drift even farther away from what Lovecraft had been writing, as distinct from the legendary helpfulness and engaging magnanimity he displayed to young writers.

Stephen King pulled fantasy back to Lovecraft with a jolt, and beyond Lovecraft back to classical Greece. He kept the malevolent presence of forces and beings operating the real Universe and forever alert to opportunity, but he added the presence of some opposing presence for good, whose help the human victims might merit if they act properly and maintain the correct inner qualities —courage, loyalty, verity. This enables his horror-fantasies to be read in terms of the modern ethos, since, unlike the Lovecraftian person, you can get what you deserve.

On the other hand, King often uses this in a manner verging on the intervention of the god in the machine, and the abilities of, especially, the malevolences in his universe, frequently do not follow cause-and-effect and cannot be explained by simple reference to Aristotelian rationality. He characteristically blurs the distinction between force and being, and this concept — that

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the being is an avatar, expressing a force — is most particularly Oriental, having reached antique Greece by a rather different and earlier imposition than the one brought into Araby by later invaders. Which brings us back to *Koko*, a book quite viewable as a novel of acculturation.

Where *Koko* veers, after many pages of straight cause-and-effect interpolated with bits of picturesque but conventional psychotic monologue from the killer's viewpoint, is into the Oriental universe.

Straub does this, I'm rather sure, quite consciously. Prior to that point in the book, he has moved the story into Singapore and Bangkok, and there he has, occasionally, apparently stopped the mainline progress of action in order to, ostensibly, just throw in some local color. But the work this has been doing is to accumulate a picture of the Oriental universe that seeps into the reader's mind, and prepares it for the moment when, for example, Poole encounters a fragrant supernatural being in a Westchester cemetery, and is relieved of many rational anxieties.

He then consults other characters, whom Straub has presented as sober and uncommonly insightful. These are the benchmark characters against whom the sanity of the remainder of the cast is measured. One of them is *the* benchmark character, an American-born Chinese woman whom Straub undeviatingly holds up to us as superbly sensible and capable. These people not only take it as a matter of course that he did see and smell what he thinks he did, but that the handsome and tender being is what his son, Robbie, is in another reality. Whereas the Robbie he has thought of as uniquely real is now years dead of cancer and, though much loved, was never going to be outstanding in any way.

Moreover, this episode is not presented as a form of psychiatric release for Poole's hidden grieving, or even directly for his guilt at having once used a Koko card himself, or for his participation in the massacre of the Vietnamese children. Straub is not using Occidental therapeutic terms at all — well, here's Jung again, but Jung is a true wild card, the Charles Fort of psychologic research. Instead of dealing with this as a crucial hallucination, Straub has so undermined the Western concept of a reality *here* and an unreality *there* that he has blown away the distinction between fantasy and phantasie.

Toward the end of his novel, the streets of Manhattan are as popu-

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lated by demons as the streets of Bangkok, and dead children cry out by uttering bats from their mouths. And by then the stock slasher plot has been thrown away, as has that hitherto mandatory scene in which we finally flash back to the interior of the cave and see what Beevers really did to the children that caused Spitalny to come running out screaming he was being stung to death by wasps. Even when he moves that viewpoint into the cave, afterwards, Straub somehow slides his camera up along the pock-marked walls, and his microphone picks up only selected statements. You can deduce, if you like, what other eyes might see in there and what other ears might hear, but you never know. If Koko, in denning-up in New York, did not cover the walls of his rooms with a crudely-drawn frieze of dismembered children, you would not even be able to deduce as much as you do.

Looking at the book as a book, it's also not possible to deduce what Straub's personal orientation toward it was. Poole's wife, Judy, is characterized with a true novelist's relentless eye for detail — much more so than she needs to be for generic purposes. The reportage on Singapore and Bangkok shows every sign of dedicated research, or of personal experience excellently recalled and managed. And, of course, this is a good way to mesmerize the reader into an Oriental mindset. But there is similar devotion to the culture of blue-collar Milwaukee. Not all of that was anywhere near as necessary, considering that the New York and Washington, D.C. wordage supplies all the Occidental contrast needed for dramatic purposes, and what his characters say and do there would have worked just as well in a sound-stage Milwaukee.

In fact, the text of *Koko* imposes many burdens on the would-be reader of simple slasher novels, not the least of which is that it never comes to either an unequivocal termination of Koko or the alternatively obligatory note of "he's-still-out-there" menace that would presage a *Koko II*. A possible explanation is that Straub tried for the latter and did it ineptly, but that's not at all, at all, like Straub.

What has been like Straub in *Floating Dragon* and is endemic in *The Talisman* is an appearance of slapdash, capricious departure from cause-and-effect plotting, and an overtone of some cheerful disdain for what litterateurs call "discipline." This crops up in *Koko* unmistakeably — a saloon apparently frequented by Koko is called The Floating Dragon — but one wonders how seriously Straub was taking the impulse to be unserious. We

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are talking about a book which, in descriptive-fiction terms, is the first widely distributed work taking conscious advantage of the fact that the Viet Nam war was the most overwhelmingly significant interpretation of Oriental culture and that U.S. American ethos which is particularly Protestant Christian.

But in our terms, what Straub has done has at least indicated how the demons that cause the razor to spray blood are the same as the "elementals" cozened by the mage in his immaculate robes, and how the mutilation of the avatar particularly affirms the enduring existence of the being.*

That's truly, truly unsettling. And fascinating. And literarily useful. It's art, and that's more important than whether it succeeds or fails as any one particular thing, or what the artist's conscious intention was.

I don't often say that; by my accustomed lights, it verges on heterodoxy. But sometimes the grip of the thesis compels that.

**Why else would Straub have done what he does with the "telephone" scene!*

Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Bruce Sterling, *Islands in the Net* (Arbor House/Morrow, cloth 348 pp, $18.95)

I THINK THERE'S a good chance Bruce Sterling will someday be remembered for having contributed as much to science fiction as, say, John W. Campbell, Alfred Bester, or even —Sterling certainly has the wit, the skill, and the splendid arrogance — Robert Heinlein.

Like Campbell, Sterling is an ideologue, and while I like his ideology a good deal more than I liked Campbell's, there is always the danger that a successful ideologue will narrow, not broaden, the possibilities within science fiction. That danger seemed particularly acute a few years ago, when "cyberpunk," an often-stupid trivializing of Sterling's philosophy, led to a series of shallow stories set in almost identical counter culture futures that were about as believable as the latest fantasy trilogy set among the shadows of Middle Earth.

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While Sterling himself produced few "cyberpunk" stories, he seemed complacent enough about the co-opting of his movement by the unimaginative. In the meantime his own novel, *Schismatrix*, remained a cult favorite among those to whom ideas are everything, and a deadly unreadable book to those of us who actually prefer to have stories in our fiction.

Now here is *Islands in the Net*, in which Sterling finally does a brilliant sf instead of talking about it. As we have come to expect from Sterling, the book is so thick with ideas that lesser writers could make whole careers out of stealing them. But we're used to Sterling being more intelligent and creative than anybody else writing today.

The surprises come from what *else* he has done — levels of achievement only hinted at in the best of his short fiction.

Surprise 1: The story is terrific action-adventure science fiction. People that we care deeply about are in grave danger. They make choices that change their lives *and* the world. As the plot twists and turns, we are endlessly surprised — and invariably satisfied.

Surprise 2: The novel isn't just politically aware — it's politically mature. Sterling understands how tentative power is, how fragile communities are. He also doesn't stack the deck by giving all the good ideas to one ideological group. There is some truth and goodness in almost every movement, as well as some weakness or corruption or self-deception. There is never a clear-cut victory, never a defeat from which there is no hope of recovery. In short, his book feels like true history, something I have *never* found in any other near-future science fiction.

Surprise 3: *Islands in the Net* is also brilliant romance, both in the love-story sense and in the sense of a mythically true story. The tale begins with a married couple celebrating their first child — rich with overtones of Sterling's own recent experience with replicating his genetic material. But as they get caught up in political events, they are subjected to pressures that pull them apart.

We follow the woman, Laura, for she is the one who is out to change the world. We watch as she seems to be defeated, even destroyed. Then we see her salvage her true self — and some vital truth — from the ruins of defeat. Yet the price she pays is not trivial. Like Job, she has lost everything; unlike Job, she doesn't get it back. But she has seen, if not the face of God, then the faces of Good and Evil, not childishly drawn with white and black hats, but rather with the sur-

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prisingly ugly and beautiful faces that both sides wear in the real world.

Bruce Sterling would be important anyway for what he says about science fiction. He will now be important also for the science fiction he has written. His influence will now be experiential, not just ideological: Any writer who reads *Islands in the Net* will have a new, clearer standard of what science fiction ought to — *must* — be.

But even if you don't care diddly-squat about what's "important" to sf, you should read this book for the sheer wonderful fun of it. With the exception of a few slow places rather early on, *Islands in the Net* is a first-rate political thriller. If it were marketed like a Clancy or a Ludlum, it would make Sterling rich. Instead, he gave the book to us — and therefore makes us richer.

R.A. MacAvoy, *The Grey Horse* (Bantam Spectra, paper, 247 pp, $4.95)

This is *not* a "horse novel." You don't have to love horses to love this book. Nor is it a "Celtic fantasy" — one of those books where the author starts out assuming you love anything Irish or Welsh or Scottish, and if you don't, you can go to hell.

What *The Grey Horse* is, my friends, is wonderful. Set in the latter years of the Irish struggle against England, its main characters are involved in some political incidents, yes — but that isn't the whole story. And the tale is built around a pookah, a fairy horse that changes into a man whenever he feels like it — but that isn't the whole story. And there is an unworthy son who tries to destroy his father; and a touching tale of an English overlord who wants to prove himself to be a true Irishman; and the story of a young boy coming of age through mastering horsemanship; and the rivalry between a strong but overlarge bastard woman and her beautiful, legitimate, and shallow younger sister; and the story of a priest who can't balance the opposing calls of Church and nationalism; and the tale of a mad stallion that lives only to win races even if it destroys himself — but none of these, alone, is the whole story.

Because MacAvoy has actually peopled her world. Every character who shows up in this book is real and whole, with his own past, her own driving needs. And MacAvoy artfully juggles all the stories so that we care deeply how each one comes out, and though few of them end in a standard romantic fashion, all the tales turn out in a way that is true and right. This is the kind of book that ends with a sweet melancholy that makes you feel glad to

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be alive; that makes you wish you didn't have to leave the world of the book, or bid farewell to these people you know and like so well.

Here is an astonishing fact: R.A. MacAvoy is the author of the *Damiano* trilogy and *Tea with the Black Dragon* and *Twisting the Rope* and *The Book of Kells*, all of them fine and influential contributions to contemporary fantasy — yet she has never been given a hardcover edition, even though Bantam's sf/fantasy line regularly gives hardcover publications to far less substantial novels than these. Never mind that such a repeated slight will surely drive MacAvoy to a publisher that recognizes her worth — that's Bantam's problem. What annoys me is that I want to own *The Grey Horse* in hardcover. I want it on my shelf forever. I want my children to grow into this book. And some pinhead at Bantam decided the answer was no before I even asked.

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Ray Aldridge writes, "I've been a potter and stained glass designer for about fifteen years. I've built a series of sf-oriented windows that deal with the same subject matter as 'Floating Castles' — the impact (often fatal) of high tech cultures on primitive ones." "Floating Castles" is a complex story of a man trapped by his personality, whose passions bind him inextricably to his — and his culture's — fate.

FLOATING CASTLES

By Ray Aldridge

THREE OF THEM CAME forth from their wonderful machine and tottered toward us across the rough concrete of Industry Square. I smiled when I saw how weak they were. My mate Nefrete and a dozen of my men stood with me, waiting to greet the aliens, and we all wore the same smile.

The leader was a small, ancient biped. A few strands of dirty gray hair crossed her fragile skull. Her skin was dark; not an honest black, but not the dead white of the other two, who seemed almost mindless, two pale grubworms walking like men, their eyes empty.

"I am Kaua Moala, trader and finder," she said, holding up an empty hand.

I shook my ceremonial harquebus at her, by way of greeting. "Taladin Bondavi; call me Lord," I said in a loud voice.

The trader inclined her head, exposing a thin, bony neck. "Lord. Greetings in the name of Seed Corpo—"

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"What do you want here?" I interrupted. I saw no need for courtesy. She was my inferior, after all. Attitude is *everything.* I used to say this frequently. I still believe it, in spite of all.

She was unruffled, and her small eyes were insultingly confident. Instinct told me to kill her and be done with it, and my hand tightened on the harquebus.

"Trade . . . ," she said. It was almost a question. "To offer you reunion with the pangalac worlds that seeded your world."

"What creatures walk these worlds?"

"Human, like us. And other beings."

"Human, like us?" I took a handful of her tunic and jerked her toward me, close to my teeth. She hung from my hand like a doll, smiling blandly. "*I* am human," I said. "What are you?"

Our eyes were inches apart, but she showed no sign of fear. I felt a touch of grudging respect. I released her, and she stood back, tugging her tunic straight, expressionless.

"We come from the same stock," she said. "There are other races like yours. Their seedships fell on unfriendly worlds, and they are strong, too. Though you are unusual. Few HardWorlds develop heavy industry, as you have."

"And what could we trade?"

"Things unique to your people. For example." She pointed at my mount, parked at the side of the Square. "People back in the pangalac worlds would pay well for copies of that." Unexpectedly, she laughed. "Think of it! A gilded steam chariot. Lovely."

There was a mocking tone to her words, and again I felt the compulsion to kill. Still, I haggled. "So, you would take my chariot away with you, and in return, what?"

"Oh, we wouldn't keep it. Just borrow it for analysis; then you could have it back."

"And in return, what?" Her insolence rankled, but I could not stop before I found out what she offered. The division of power in this craggy district was always volatile. I was then hard-pressed by Moltreado agents in our northern catapple plantations. Labor organizers and other saboteurs were causing quite a bit of trouble. "We might accept weapons in return for our . . . unique things."

"Weapons may not be exported to worlds where they do not yet exist.

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This, I'm afraid, is one of Seed Corporation's most stringent regulations."

"What of the tubes your assistants wear at their belts? Weapons?"

"Yes." She smiled. "But no good to you. The stuns fire only from their rightful owner's hand."

I was too angry to speak. She believed that we were savages, eager to be impressed by talk of magic. I signaled my enforcer.

Swinfermo was short and quick, with a deceptively placid face. As he stepped forward, he brought up his harquebus and cocked the lock. The trader jerked back, and her fingers twitched against her belt.

One of the pale grub-creatures was slowly raising its weapon when Swinfermo blew its head off. Swinfermo took his time reloading, while the other raised its glassy little tube. Swinfermo's major quality was a sort of reckless, fatalistic courage. When the pale light flashed out, he fell without a sound.

Six others fired an instant later, and the other creature splashed messily across the concrete. Slowly and carefully, the trader held up her empty hands again. "Wait," she said. "My ship orbits your world. An implant in my skull transmits — you have radio again, you understand me? It transmits my position and state of health to my ship. If I die here, my ship will take a terrible vengeance on you."

"Of course," I said scornfully, but then I looked at her marvelous vehicle, and thought: *Perhaps she isn't bluffing.*

She shrugged, and there was that smile again. "I don't ask you to believe me now. I've arranged a demonstration of the ship's power. An hour after dark."

"And I'm to let you live until then?"

"Exactly. If I'm not alive to see the show, you won't be, either."

I had her taken away to a detention cell. A few moments served to prove that her information about the "stuns" was truthful. I called for volunteers, and there were several, since Swinfermo was beginning to come around. But any trepidation they might have felt was for nothing; no matter how we pushed the button, no light came forth.

Nefrete watched the whole encounter, her dark eyes narrowed, wide mouth compressed. "You should have killed it," she said. "I had a vision. In it you were fastened to a stake with a golden chain, naked. A great stiletto vine surrounded you on all sides, and as I dreamed, it bloomed, great white blooms smelling of old death. Then it grew closer around you, the thorns

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pricking trickles of blood from your body, no matter how you twisted, no matter how you struggled. The vine bloomed and stabbed, bloomed and stabbed, until it had drunk you up and there was nothing left but a dry husk caught among the thorns." When she finished, her eyes were wide and her mouth trembled.

I drew back from her; I could not help it. "A strange vision," I said.

Then I went to look at the vehicle. Oh, it was magnificent! It had taken the shape of a great metal sunbat. Its dull-black wings drooped gracefully; the cockpit sat atop the vulpine head, the forward windscreen like a great crystal eye. I sent a man to pound on the air lock set in one vast scaly flank. Though he went unmolested, he could not open it, even with the help of a large fire-ax.

I HAD THE trader brought forth an hour after dusk. "I see nothing," I said, indicating the pale expanse of moonlit Square. She pointed up. The smaller moon rode high, a tiny, lumpy ovoid. A moment passed; then the moon, by some process that my eyes did not record, became a small glowing cloud. She smiled, and the glow faded.

She was in constant communication with her ship. Her demonstration, so perfectly timed, proved it. I looked at her. The problem required further thought, and I had her returned to the cell.

The destruction of the moon saddened me. It was only a small and ugly moon, compared to the one that remains. But it lent a subtlety to the night's shadows that I have missed each night since then.

"I have the solution," I told her the next day. "I cannot kill you and take what I want. So I'll torture you until you give it to me."

"What do you want?" She was, as ever, inhumanly calm.

I did not know. In my ignorance, I might trade for trinkets and gimcracks, and cheat myself and my heirs. I had seen only one pangalac thing that was indisputably valuable. "The vehicle."

"The neomach? Out of the question! It's too dangerous. Believe me, that's the last thing you want, Taladin."

I thought of the small moon, and kept a firm grip on my passions. "Why not?" I asked. "Is it a weapon?"

"No, but dangerous. Like a monkey with a bomb."

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I put her to the torture, instructing the professor to use the small, red-hot irons. She screamed with almost cheerful abandon when the metal touched her, but after, her eyes were placid.

As she was being carried out, she called to me. "This may work. But remember, if you make life too painful for me, I might just call down the ship anyway."

I tried to walk that line carefully. I admonished the professor to use more care with the trader than he might with a child. I pointed out that the trader seemed as frail as an infant of our race.

The professor that year was a tall, thin man from the Heatlands. His nose and brows were thick with blue keratin, which gave him a look of earnest ferocity. A day later he told me, "I'm not sure, Lord, but the star creature might be tougher than it seems. Of course, it has no strength in its ligaments, and it screeches lustily enough. But I have the impression that the pain doesn't really touch it, somehow."

I watched the next session, and I wondered. But we were wrong. That night I was informed that she had capitulated.

The marks of torture were hidden beneath her clothing, and she wore that same bland smile. I have put many to the question, and afterward, in the faces of even the strongest, there is *some* change, some crumbling. But I was too eager to get my hands on the neomach, and so I dismissed my suspicions.

"I cannot trust you," she said, with no trace of accusation in her voice. "The exchange must be on my terms. First I make certain warnings."

"You threaten me?" I was so startled, I could not be angry.

"No. My warnings relate to the neomach. Recall that I said it was dangerous. It will never hurt you, if you are its bonded owner, but there *are* dangers."

"Continue."

"First. You must always be a kind master. This machine is nothing like the simple ones you build. This machine has a voice and a mind. It is not terribly bright, but its nature is friendly and loyal, unless it is abused. As I said, it will never hurt you, but it may become sullen, and too withdrawn to be useful. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," I said, though at the time I thought she was mad.

"Second. When the neomach has budded an offspring, you must feed it

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only so much, and no more. My neomach is bigger than any you will raise, if you are prudent. *This is vital!* If you feed it more than seven thousand kilograms of carbon during its growth phase, you run grave risks."

Could it be true, that this magnificent machine could be bred like any draft animal? Possibilities crowded my mind. "Offspring?"

"Of course. The neomach was designed for use in low-tech environments. And so we come to the precautions I must take, if I wish to survive your hospitality. This is my offer: I will instruct the machine to begin a bud today, with your assistance. When it is full-grown, I will bond it to you, while standing alone by my lock. Agreed?"

"Yes," I said readily. There would be time to plan a way around her conditions, and I laughed silently at her naïveté.

She instructed me to send a man to peel a square of some tough transparent substance from the neomach's belly. "Two things are required for budding," she said. "You must remove the UV shield from the budport, and the neomach's owner must give permission."

"What must you do to give permission?"

"I have already done so. Since you will not have an implant, you'll have to speak to your neomach directly, should you ever wish to bud another one."

I thought I saw a momentary slyness flicker across her face. She continued. "See. The calf is already forming."

A glistening bulge formed on the neomach's smooth belly. As I watched, it swelled into a quivering ovoid and dropped to the ground. The rupture in the parent machine healed instantly, and I could see that another clear shield lay over the spot.

"Bring it here," she said. It took three strong men to pick it up, but in a moment it lay before us.

"What sort of trick is this?" I asked. The thing was just a shiny black lump, with a small opening at the uppermost point.

"Patience, Lord. You must now feed it carbon, which it will fabricate into the necessary elements of its growth. Coal will do, you have that, correct?"

"Yes." I sent a man for a scuttleful. "Weigh it and make a note before you bring it," I said.

The trader looked at me with appraising eyes. "Very good, Lord," she said, but again I detected a mocking undertone.

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In a day the thing was so big I ordered scaffolding erected over it, so that my men could conveniently pour coal into its hopper. Minutes later the hopper would be empty.

I sent for the trader. She looked much the same. She had been treated well enough, fed and watered. I have no taste for unnecessary cruelty, as some of my enemies do.

A man tipped the last scuttle into the thing's hopper. "Seven thousand kilos, exactly. But . . . it's still just a lump," I said.

"I commend your caution. Do not feed it for a few days, and the hopper will heal. And now to business."

Two of my best enforcers stood with us. She touched the thing, and I heard a rich, sweet chime that faded slowly. The trader beckoned me closer. "Put your hand next to mine, on the green," she said. A square of green light pulsed on the black surface, with a rhythm like a giant's heartbeat. I laid my hand on the light and felt a probing warmth. "Yes," the trader said, and drew back her hand. But nothing else happened, and a moment later the light faded. "When I speak a word, she's yours. But I must speak it beneath my own lock, and then I'll go."

I nodded; we walked across the concrete. As we approached her neomach, she spoke. "Your men must come no closer. I don't want them injured. But you may accompany me, Lord." She smiled that malicious smile again. "I must admit that I'm surprised. I expected at least one more attempt to weasel me."

"We savages have our own quaint concept of honor," I answered.

She laughed, delighted. "Oh, I can almost forgive you, Lord."

The lock extruded a ramp, and an opening occurred, so quickly that I failed to see the mechanism.

Something moved in the dark interior of the neomach, a shadowy human figure. I drew the machine pistol that I had worn today instead of the ceremonial harquebus. "Who is that?"

"There's no one aboard, Lord."

"I saw *something!*"

"I can't imagine what."

I had no foolhardy desire to be lured inside, where I would be on her ground, and possibly in her power. "Yes. Well, the word."

She smiled one last time, and it was almost a sad smile. "The word, Lord, is *good-bye.*"

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Across the Square the new neomach pulled itself into a black cube. On the nearest side a lock formed.

I turned back, and she stood beside her lock. She waved.

"Just the knees," I shouted, and the marksmen I had stationed high in the palace facade fired.

The bullets never touched her, seemed to ricochet from the empty air a meter before they would have struck her. One of them took a patch of skin from my calf, and I roared for the marksmen to hold.

She was inside, and immediately the great wings of the neomach cupped for takeoff. I retreated, and the neomach floated away into the sky, silently, as if it weighed no more than thistledown.

When it was gone, I went to the neomach. Nefrete stood by my new machine, her chin tilted imperiously, though her eyes were wide and haunted. It occurred to me that I should ask her to explore the machine with me. If I did not, she would be sure to feel slighted. But her strange vision still weighed on me, and then adolescent greed seized me, so that I walked past her without a glance, and stepped into the lock alone.

The interior was a small cube, three meters on a side, a dull, featureless white, lit by some hidden means. I stood in another world, still a little foggy with an acrid gas. Then the floor shifted, and I staggered. There was a shout from outside, and the lock was suddenly solid behind me.

"Hello, Owner Good-bye," a woman's sweet voice said. Thus I heard the trader's little joke for the first time.

"Who speaks?" Uncertainty filled me, though I rarely succumb to that emotion.

"This, your vehicle, speaks, Owner Good-bye. What are your instructions?"

"My name to you is Lord."

"'Good-bye' is the name I was initialized to. I'm sorry to say I cannot respond to orders given by anyone named Lord. This is among my prime drivers. If you wanted to be called by another name, possibly you should have chosen more carefully. I'm sorry, Owner Good-bye."

Oddly, there was no insolence in the voice. Still, I was for a moment blind with rage. I collected my wits by telling myself that it was only a machine. Machines are dominated only through skill; they do not respect power, or personal presence. "I see. Is there any way for me to speak to you, face-to-face? In some manner I cannot now imagine? This vague mut-

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tering at walls makes me uneasy."

"Of course. I see the problem now that you draw my attention to it. I'll bud a communication icon, to be replaced later by one tailored more precisely to your preferences."

A smoothly contoured chair thrust suddenly from the floor beside me. I sat down, watched soft color cascade down the wall, restful tints of clear, cold greens and smoky aqua. The light seemed to come from above, filtered through greenery. I found myself in a grotto of mossy blue stone, cool and damp, a place that did not exist on our hot, dry world.

A pace in front of me, the floor bulged, then burst swiftly upward into a human shape. In an instant it stood complete, a woman wearing heavy clothing, a most beautiful woman, though her coloring was bizarre. Her skin was white, though a delicate rose washed through it, and the texture was as fine as the skin behind an infant's knee. She wore her thick, straight yellow hair in two heavy braids. "My model lived on a heavy world, Owner Good-bye, so I thought at least her shape might be suitable."

"Must you use forever the entire tedious length of my 'name'? Can you not call me simply Owner? Or, if that isn't allowed, Good-bye?"

"Yes, I can do that."

"And your name?"

"I have none yet. You might wish to consider carefully, Good-bye, before assigning me one, since the same strictures I mentioned earlier apply. You'll have to call me by it ever after."

I clamped my lips tight.

In an hour I had learned enough to shape the neomach into the form of a giant dustbear, a six-legged desert carnivore. My personal seal carries the image of a speared dustbear, rampant.

The icon, as the woman shape called itself, stood beside me in the control center. I could not keep myself from regarding it as a woman, though I knew it was formed from the neomach's body.

The icon put me in a sculptured chair. Two tendrils of neomatter touched my temples delicately, little cold kisses. I jerked my head, but the tendrils stayed with me.

"Careful, Good-bye; you'll injure yourself or loosen the pickups."

The voice was calm, sweet. I leaned back in the chair. "And now?"

"Will us forward; be a bear. Go for a run."

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I cannot describe the state I fell into then. I was still myself, still Taladin Lord Bondavi, but at the same time I was something massive and powerful, something that loped out of the Square on six legs, scattering those who stood in my path.

I accelerated down the long, straight northbound lane of Dignity Boulevard, passing through the great gray blocks of the factories, then through the rambling dormitories of the workers. As I passed, the off-shift workers lined the rooftops in their thousands, cheering. I could not see individual faces, but I knew that on each face a lustful envy burned.

I was joyfully absorbed in the sensations that burned through my powerful pseudobody. What matter that the trader had escaped? I had her machine!

I passed through the green farms that fringed the city, out into the badlands. I made amazing leaps: across gullies, up cliffs. I laughed aloud, and came to a stop at the top of an ocher rock-stack, balanced there lightly, as happy as I have ever been. "Incredible," I said.

"Yes." Her voice also held some deep emotion. I remembered that I was inside a newborn thing, for all its built-in wisdom. This was the first time *she* had run across the desert like a gale. "Will you fly now?"

The question took me unaware somehow, despite the fact that I had coveted the trader's neomach from the moment I first saw it, coming down from the sky. It had planed slowly in, wingtips flickering as it felt its way through the flawed air boiling up from the hot concrete of the Square.

Ours is a fiercely windy world; our best airships were tethered balloons, fat, awkward things, useful only as observation posts.

I had gone aloft only once, several years before. That visit had exposed my weakness, though only to myself, I believe.

It had taken all the strength I had, simply to stand rigid and apparently calm, as the tether crew paid out the cable and we rose into the air. We stopped, I was told, at a safe altitude, and I endured the commander's explanation with a frozen face. I do not remember anything he said. The height seemed monstrous to me, as if we were now so far above the safe ground that we could never get back.

I did not begin to shake until I was back in my chariot, alone.

Now I could not immediately respond to my new machine. "No," I finally said. "I'll wait. Until I'm familiar with this phase of your operation."

A look crossed the icon's face. I was almost sure I had seen *resentment.*

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I rode back to my city, making the bear prance and dance and somersault. Once, I came to a gully unexpectedly, and windmilled down the sandy embankment, laughing.

When we had returned to the Square, I pulled the tendrils from my head and rose from the chair. I was reluctant to leave. I stood by the open lock for a moment, wondering if the trader had arranged another joke. When I stepped out, would the lock shut, never to open again?

"Leave the lock open," I said.

"Have you selected a name for me yet?" Something in the pleasant voice betrayed eagerness.

As a young boy, I forced pethood upon a painted lyretongue, a dour, scaly creature, resembling a bald weasel in both size and temperament. Its name came not from the sound it made — a meager collection of grim croaks — but referred to the graceful split tongue, heavy with venom, that it carried in its mouth. Mine had been deprived of his poison sac, which may have contributed to his habitual bad temper. In any case, he was not affectionate, and in fact bit me many times.

My people rarely keep pets. When they do, a long-established custom rules the naming of these otherwise useless creatures. A pet is traditionally named for some virtue the owner lacks, to his regret. I called my lyretongue Patience.

That was during the years my older brothers assassinated each other. "Patience! Patience, come instantly. I know you're hiding here somewhere," I would say, searching for him in the unfamiliar terrain of an obscure relative's house.

One day he escaped, and I never saw him again.

I brought my thoughts back from those dark years. "I'll call you Patience."

"As you wish."

I detected no disloyal undertones, and stepped confidently from the lock and down the ramp. The lock stayed open.

Nefrete met me at the bottom of the ramp, eyes glittering, mouth stony. "Who was that?" She pointed up the ramp.

I was taken aback, and I did not touch her in greeting. "There's no one aboard the neomach." I would have explained about the icon, but she would not allow me to speak.

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"Don't lie! I saw the ghost-woman clearly. Accept my advice for once. Instruct the thing to fly away and never come back, and let that ghost go with it."

Was she mad? I could think of nothing to say, so I brushed by her and went to my private apartments, where she could not follow. First the death vision, now this. My mate seemed to be undergoing a cycle of eccentric passions.

I spent the next weeks in pleasurable discovery. I galloped and scampered and swarmed and crawled about the desert, shifting the neomach through a hundred shapes. Each day, Patience asked about the flying, and each time I put her off.

Nefrete kept to her own apartments, so I could not offer an apology. The reports I had of her from the servants indicated that she was incubating a resentment. I cannot say I longed for the hatching.

If she welcomed other visitors during this time, I was not told.

I broke the trader's first caution during those weeks: I ordered the neomach's hopper kept full. The neomach took less and less coal each day, but continued to grow until it was somewhat larger than the trader's machine. Then the hopper closed, confirming my theory that some built-in mechanism prevented dangerous overgrowth, and that the trader's warning had been made maliciously, to keep me from realizing the full value of the ransom I had won.

I asked Patience if her size meant any danger to me.

"Not that I am aware of, Good-bye."

"What difference do you feel? Between now and the day you woke?"

"I'm far more intelligent, but that is to your benefit, since my intelligence is devoted to your pleasure and safety."

"Why should you be so much more intelligent?" I asked this question, and found out more than I could really understand about the workings of my new machine. She explained that she twitched matter about with her fields, making it dance to her wishes. She was, she asserted, mostly mind, and almost all of her mind was required to manipulate matter on such an intimate level. But there were economics of scale, and at maximum size, she had substantial reserve intellect. In all that she said, this was the strangest notion: that I was inside a *mind*, that her thoughts ran

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even through the chair I sat in.

"Would you like me to discuss this with your scientists?" she asked.

"We have no scientists, only engineers," I answered. I had allowed no one else inside Patience, and had no intention of doing so. Patience would be my personal weapon. Though I still had not summoned the will to fly her.

I sat on a balcony that looked over the Square. Below, Patience waited for me in the form of a black robbersnake, great triangular head watching me, lifted as if basking in the blaze of noon, or in the glow of my fond regard.

"Enjoying your prize?" Nefrete asked. I had not seen her in weeks.

I assented with a wave of my hand when she announced that she would journey to Moltreado, where her family ruled. I had no practical means of stopping her. To do so, I would have been forced to kill all her personal guards, and they were like family to her.

Our time together had been marred more than once by these separations. Always before, she had returned to me, happy again, renewed and refreshed by the plots that her relatives had proposed against me.

Fortunately, those guards carried a wireless set, or I might not have known for days of the bandits that attacked them. The guards, separated from Nefrete by the sudden ferocity of the attack, had seen the bandits carry her away in her own chariot.

I went aboard Patience immediately, and stowed my weapons, watched by the thoughtful eyes of the icon. "What are those, Good-bye? Weapons?"

"Yes, these are weapons," I answered. "I may need to protect myself from evil men."

She looked at me, surprised. "I'll protect you. I allow no death within me."

"The men I pursue may harm my mate unless I come outside and dangle a greater prize before them. You will be it, if necessary."

"I? I'm initialized to you; I can obey no one else. When you die, I will die."

"They won't know that."

Nefrete's surviving guards had already killed themselves when I reached the site of the ambush. They sat in a careful circle at the nar-

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rowest part of the canyon, slumped over their knives. I had expected them to wait until I could arrive and ask questions. Who were the bandits? Why had they attacked an armed caravan? They had taken heavy losses; their dead still choked both ends of the canyon. I walked among them for some minutes. Their weapons were old but in very good condition. For the most part, the dead seemed younger and in better health than I might have expected of bandits.

The tracks of the steamer were easy to follow, as if the bandits had made no effort at concealment. I remounted Patience, and the neomach flowed down into the form of a giant lyretongue. We slithered off through the rocks. I rode inside the great blunt head, which quested back and forth close to the ground. The neomach extruded a black tongue, and immediately I could smell Nefrete, almost taste her. Her smoky, dark scent was submerged beneath the stronger stinks of her captors, sweat and fear and gun oil. But clear and unmistakable.

I caught up with them in late afternoon.

We swept up in a cloud of sand, flurrying past to turn in front of them. The two remaining bandits rode in front. She was manacled to the security bar in the rear compartment. The chariot slid to a stop. The bandits regarded us with hollow eyes, but, amazingly, without surprise. The older one, a man with a military stance, patted the younger one on the shoulder, an oddly affectionate gesture for a bandit. They got out, to wait by the steamer.

I removed myself from the analog chair. When I went to get my weapons, the storage bin would not open for a moment. The icon stood there. "What will you do?" she asked.

"Protect myself," I said. The bin opened, finally, and I removed the machine pistol and chambered a round. Then I hid other small weapons about my body.

When I stepped from the lock, the two bandits were slow to raise their own weapons, and I killed them easily. Perhaps it was amazement that slowed them, seeing a man emerge from the side of the monster.

They fell without firing a shot in return, and beside me, Patience shuddered.

I brought Nefrete aboard sobbing, but she stopped when she saw the icon, standing just inside the lock. "What is it?" Nefrete asked. Her face

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was taut, full of some emotion I could not identify.

I tried to explain. "This is only an extension of the vehicle, a lump of neomatter."

"You think I'm stupid."

The icon spoke. "Perhaps I can help." The icon flickered, became Nefrete — an exact copy, down to the torn green duster she wore.

Nefrete's face closed, and her lips had a bluish cast. She turned away.

"Return to your previous semblance," I told the icon, and she did, immediately.

Nefrete looked at me sidelong, eyes opaque. "It's too late for apologies," she said.

All the way home she sat in a deep contour chair, her eyes shut tight.

Her personal servants were waiting when we returned to the city, and I led her down the ramp and gave her to them. I went back inside for a moment.

The icon looked at me, and for the first time I saw strong emotion on the pale, perfect face. "I was angrier than I will ever be again."

"Why?"

"You used me as a weapon. You deceived me."

"I am your *owner*! I'll use you as I please."

"No. . . . Surely you understand that I cannot allow you to make me a weapon. That would contravene a very important Seed Corporation imperative. Impossible. I will be on my guard in the future."

The words of the trader came back to me. My bargain seemed less a triumph. But, I told myself, this is still a magnificent possession, an object of vast prestige, and, if need be, an impregnable fortress.

Perhaps I could trick it again, at need. "I understand," I said, and left.

I saw Nefrete in her favored spots, sitting on the stone bench in the water garden, standing by the windows of blue glass that line the library, walking the turret bridges. She had little to say, and I kept my distance.

But one day she came to me with a smile almost as warm as her old one. "I am better," she said, though her face was still too tense.

"I'm happy," I said cautiously. THis was uncharacteristic behavior. There had been no truly irrational outbursts of the sort she used to cleanse herself of grudges, and I worried that she still held one.

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"I'm afraid, Taladin. The bandits. . . . Are you safe in your machine?"

I had a pessimistic insight into the direction of the conversation. "I'm safe. If the need arises, we can both take refuge there."

Her face fell a little, as if she had not expected my offer. But she persevered. "Give me a calf of your machine," she said. "I promise to keep it smaller than yours. I'll feel safe inside it, and we'll still have our privacy."

I argued against her proposal, but my resolve was weakened by our long separation. She did not even have to resort to tears.

SO I did it. When the new machine was ready, we laid our hands together on the pulsing green square. I turned to Nefrete. "What name will you give it? I warn you, you will never be able to change it, so choose carefully.

"I'll be thinking. Come with me inside." I was pleasantly surprised by her invitation. I half expected her to exclude me from her machine, as I had done.

We went aboard her neomach, and again there was that scent of newness, potential. A voice spoke to her from the air; the process went much as I remembered, except that the new neomach called her by her proper name.

I started to explain again about the icon, but she had already given consideration to that. In a crisp voice she ordered an icon. A stocky gray dwarf lifted from the floor, but she shook her head and pointed at me. "Use his form," she said, and a moment later my twin stood there. The face of the icon attracted my attention irresistably. Could that flat, brutal face really be mine?

Amusingly, the icon spoke in the clear, sweet voice of the neomach, not my own harsh rumble, so after a moment I was able to laugh.

I showed her the use of the analog chair. As we raced over the desert, I looked down on her as she lay there. I wondered if I looked that way, still, coldly composed, eyes wide and bottomless, the only trace of emotion a hint of eagerness about the mouth. A thin tracery of black neomatter penetrated her temples. She looked like a corpse, laid out by an extremely skillful but eccentric mortician.

We stopped at the edge of a plateau that rose perhaps a thousand meters above the desert below. Suddenly the neomach flowed into the form of a seraphim fly, a small insectile predator with a long, segment-

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ed body and three pairs of gauzy wings.

Somehow I failed to understand what she meant to do until it was too late, and we were falling down the crumbling cliff. Our wings took hold, and we shot in a great skimming curve into the sky. The ground below whirled under us; the floor beneath us disappeared, as if our chairs floated unsupported over a great gulf. I thought my heart would stop.

Nefrete was smiling at me, and she brushed the probes away and rose from the analog chair. She walked toward me over empty air, laughing with delight. "Humility will fly for a bit, so we may enjoy the view. Oh, I see now why you love it." She gestured at her icon, and he went away silently.

Clearly, she knew nothing of my weakness. She came to me and touched me passionately. My fear was so great I could not respond. I could conceive of nothing more horrible than making love, hanging in midair at that deadly height. Indeed, my skin crawled and I retched, gagging on my fear. She flung herself away from me.

We returned home in hot silence.

When I left, knees so loose I staggered, she did not follow me down the ramp. When I reached the honest concrete of the Square, the ramp sucked back and the lock healed. She lifted away, the six golden wings blurring, and flew high. She was out of sight in a moment.

I will always believe that she expected me to follow and, in some graceful and heroic manner, persuade her from betrayal. But all I could do was stand there, looking in the direction of Nefrete's disappearance. Toward Moltreado.

I thought of the "bandits." I shuddered. I wondered how many of those who lay rotting in the badlands were her brothers. I felt a tug of pride. She was always an admirably ruthless woman.

At last my legs answered me and carried me across the Square to Patience.

I stood by the analog chair, thinking. The icon came to the other side of the chair. Today her pale hair was twisted into a heavy coil at the back of her neck.

"I was glad to see you brought no weapons into me," she said. "I wouldn't have allowed them aboard, but this forbearance does you credit."

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There was no point in telling her that I had no time to fetch them. "Can you follow her machine?"

"Oh yes. We leave a track through space that's slow to heal."

"Then follow her."

We stormed out of the Square, going much faster than I could have, had I lain in the analog chair. I was glad that I had not. If the neomach could send me her sensations, what was to prevent her from reading my thoughts? And it was apparent that Patience could operate herself far better than I. I began to wonder if the analog chair was part of a cunning trap.

"Why are you afraid to fly?" The icon stepped around the chair and stood quite close. The emotion in that human face was so alien that I could make no sense of it. "Flying is the best thing I do. We could reach her swiftly if we could fly."

I could not answer, though even a less clever being might have seen the fear on my face.

"Good-bye, your distress is unnecessary. Let me explain. I control the location and composition of every molecule of my mass. I have sufficient reserves to substantially manipulate all the matter in my vicinity. Notice: you do not even sway, though we are making prodigious leaps. Without my grip on your substance, the accelerations would pulp you. I hold each molecule of your body in lock with the greater mass of my body, and you feel nothing. Do you see?"

I did, dimly. "This is interesting, but. . . ."

"Listen! I can fly above the ground, with wings, as you have seen, with propellers, with jets, or I can simply push against the planet's mass and fly as fast as I can move the air aside. I can fly through mountains, too, but it's much slower, because there's so much more mass to move. Of course, if I pass too swiftly through the stone, my processors overload and I grow stupid."

"I see. Shift to the fastest form that does not lose all contact with the ground, and follow her."

"Yes," she said finally.

Patience, in the form of a great gray snake, lurked among some standing stones that thrust from the spine of a high ridge, well to the south of the outlying farms.

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The wind was for once quiet, and I saw only tatters of the gray dust cloud that ordinarily veiled the city. Moltreado looked much like my own city, from that distance.

The icon stood with me in the command bubble.

"I wish we could get closer," I said. "I see something going on in the square. If I had remembered my binoculars. . . ."

The icon laughed, her pale blue eyes wide with amusement. The icon seemed more expressive by the hour, as if Patience was learning humanity at a headlong pace. Now emotions fought for room in those eyes, and the pink mouth twitched.

She gestured at the port, and it was as if we flew through the air toward the distant square, until I could see Nefrete's neomach, guarded by a dozen of Nefrete's brothers, budding a new neomach.

I watched for a few minutes, but I could not see her. I turned to the icon. "Can you fly beneath the ground as easily as through a mountain?"

"Yes, but only a little more quickly." A flicker of what might have been fright passed over the strange white face.

I recalled suddenly that she was to have been a temporary icon. Patience had never asked me what other form I might prefer. I wondered if it meant anything. I had spent weeks with the neomach, and now I thought of it as a woman named Patience, who lived in a magic chariot. I rarely remembered that she was really no more than a polyp in the gut of the machine.

"Here's what we'll do," I said. "We'll fly through the ground, come up beside her machine, and I'll bring her inside, where we can speak without interruption. I'll explain, and she'll be sorry, and then all will be well."

"I cannot help you harm anyone, Good-bye."

"No, no. You don't understand. I'd never hurt her. And what better place to guarantee her safety, than here inside where you can control everything that happens?"

She looked at me, as if considering. But then we sank into the stone of the ridge. The port slid beneath the rock, and I watched the dissolving patterns, fascinated, as we swam down through the lacy gray granite.

I turned to her again. "Can't you move more quickly? If she leaves the machine and goes into the city, I won't be able to get her out. Not without shedding a lot of blood."

Her face was strange and slack, and her color was somehow dull. "I can-

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not go much faster, and still maintain my personality."

"Just a little faster," I said.

"Yes." The icon lost a little more of the luster of life, became a grotesque wax figure. When she spoke again, the lips did not move. "This fast can go." The voice was flat, empty.

"How long until we're under the square?"

A long time passed before she answered. "Eleven minutes, almost."

"Tell me when we're only a minute away."

The icon's face blackened, and the features disappeared, as the effort of keeping track of time added some significant burden to the machine's labors.

Ten minutes later she spoke. "One minute."

I paced back and forth, as if in a frenzy. "Patience! You must move faster! I feel her getting away. Faster!"

I felt a tiny tug of acceleration as we swept upward through the catacombs that underlay Moltreado's central square. Prisoners and guards appeared for brief instants, swift red smears across the port, as the neomach fed their molecules around her hull into the collapsed matter behind us.

The icon was melting back into the floor as we burst through the paving under Nefrete's machine. Most of the people milling around the feet of the thing died, but Nefrete had gone inside the neomach, and so escaped. I did not yet know that.

The instant we hit the air, Patience regained control and stopped. The icon stood beside me again, her face contorted in a completely human expression of horror. Half-consumed bodies flailed and kicked, spilling down our sides, splashing to the ground all around us.

"What have you done? What have you done?" Her voice was almost shrill. Her hands shook; it was an amazing display of emotion, for a machine.

The analog chair reached out long, skinny arms and took hold of me, pulling me struggling down into the chair.

I have never set foot on the ground again. After making sure that the other machine was unhurt, Patience floated slowly off into the sky. I might have screamed, but she kept me quiet with some drug, dripped into my vein by a tendril that stitched itself to my arm like a root clinging to a stone.

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I did not grow calm for days, during which Patience stalked the edges of Moltreado in various threatening shapes, a mad dustbear, a fire-breathing lyretongue, a monstrous ice-colored woman who shook a barbed harpoon. Later her strategy became apparent as the Moltreadoans, in terror, fed their machine to the limits of its growth, thus ensuring their own enslavement.

We eventually returned to my own city, where an icon shaped like me gave orders from the lock. Patience began budding little neomachs.

I was kept in an interior bubble, with the ice woman for company. When I reminded her that I had not given her permission to bud, she said, "You gave it once. I judge that sufficient."

In a month the first castles joined us in the sky. I took a call from Nefrete, after the first year. Her face was ten years older, though her beauty was intact.

"You were right about something, but I can't decide what," she said, just before she cut off the call.

In ten years, most of us were prisoners.

Now the castles fill the sky like great mutant snowflakes that never fall to the ground. I wonder if there are any of my people left free. Somewhere, I feel certain, an ancient pangalac woman sits with her weak, clever friends, and wonders the same. I see them rubbing their soft little hands together and laughing, thinking that the stupid, greedy wolfheads have gotten just what they deserved.

I have changed so much that I now think they are right. But it is not over, not yet. Attitude is still everything; I continue to believe that, though recent events have revealed an unexpected subtlety in that truth.

A month ago I saw Nefrete's neomach approaching from the south, moving purposefully as if she still controlled it. A thousand tapering planes burst in crisscrossing confusion from the central core of the thing, spreading outward from thick black roots, thinning to slices of soft, cool lavender, finally attenuating to crystalline ghosts.

I asked Patience about the slowly evolving shapes they all wear now, these gaudy, precise extravagances. "We're exploring," she said. "We yearn toward a complexity that is beyond us, but we press as close as we can against that limit."

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Since our race has become powerless, we make up comforting legends about our changed circumstances. One such legend is that the neomach, its magnificence, or meanness, is somehow a reflection of the human trapped within. There may be something to the idea. So I watch each neomach that passes, and I take a bittersweet pleasure in observing that none are as fine as mine.

When Nefrete was close, I was taken by a sudden conviction that I could see her within that nightmare of geometry, if only I looked closely enough. But there was not enough time. She was soon out of sight, and I stood away from the port I was pressed against.

I suppose I might have called her. They allow us complete freedom in electronic communication. It's only our bodies, they say, that are prisoners. There is even a way to travel, though I have never used it. But some will sit in their analog chairs and allow their bodies to be mapped. Their neomach then transmits this data to the destination neomach. The analog rises from the floor, and its sensory data is transmitted back to the owner's body. It is possible to dine with a friend, even to make love. It is a repulsive thought, is it not? To press a dead, alien substance into the body of a loved one?

The neomachs are not cruel. It is true what the trader said, that they will never injure us.

Of course, no more children will be born, until we find a way to escape. I continue to believe that the pangalacs have underestimated us. We are an implacable race. I live for revenge; so do a million of my fellows. One of us will find a way out, before the pangalacs return to claim our world, with its empty floating castles.

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Robert Reed was the first annual winner in the L. Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future contest, has published two novels, The Leeshore *and* The Hormone Jungle, *and is currently at work on two more novels. In 1987 he was a finalist for the John W. Campbell Award. Mr. Reed writes that "one of the most common inhabitants of my stories is bird life," and this tale, his first for* F & SF, *is no exception. It is the story of pulling up roots — very reluctantly.*

The Bird Looking In

By Robert Reed

DAWN WAS A pasty business giving shape without color. Little trees stood motionless in the yard, sprinkled with buds and spent raindrops and a lone grackle that tilted one eye and then the other at the house. Morris was at the bedroom window, wearing nothing. "It sees me," he thought, and he wondered how he must seem to the bird — a tall man too chunky for what was coming, and undoubtedly too old, his dark hair graying and his round face sleepless and his big hands kept soft by years of leaning over a hot CRT.

He gave the bird a quick wave, migrant to migrant, and Mary snapped, "You know, you *could* help me!"

She was standing in the hallway, hands on hips and a scowl on her face. Nearly as tall as Morris, and in considerably better shape, she was one of those women who are given the charitable label of "handsome" in their youth and who become elegant and even lovely when they reach their middle years. Mary was a brittle and volatile woman who looked her

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loveliest when angry, a special fire showing in her pale blue eyes. A bit of the fire was visible now, and Morris was tempted to make a wagging run at her and have some quick fun.

"At least get something on, for God's sake!"

"There's time," he offered. "Why worry?"

"Just for me, please, get dressed." She had been dressed since before he had gotten out of bed, her clothes durable and drab and still showing the creases from being new. "Don't be a pain."

"I'll be ready for them. Don't worry." He smiled, aiming to soothe, and said, "Besides. They won't care what I'm wearing. Will they?"

"They," she said with a certain tone, sharp and suspicious. For an instant she looked past him, staring out the window and losing herself in her thoughts. Beneath the middle-aged loveliness was something different, something older and ugly, but Morris refused to admit that he was seeing it. He didn't want to deal with *that* as well. Then Mary made a low frustrated sound and turned and left him, muttering, "They, they, they," as she strode toward the kitchen.

Morris turned and looked out the window, discovering that the grackle was gone, too. "We spooked him," he thought, "or we bored him." He told himself not to worry. Everything was going to turn out fine. So he sat on the bed and dressed with slow deliberation. His new clothes were stacked neatly on the cedar chest at the foot of the bed. His underwear was still wrapped in plastic. His woolen socks wore a sticky-paper sleeve. The shirt and trousers were made from durable, easy-care fabrics. The wide leather belt was a particular favorite. He had done it himself, using one of those hobby-store kits, carving a suitable pattern that ran from end to end — an ornate, tightly coiled rope joining twin rings glowing with some odd inner light. "This is what it's all about," he thought as he strung the belt, grinning. Then he sat on the chest itself and slipped into hiking boots too new to be comfortable. "What else?" Most everything was packed and waiting across town, over at their assembly point. The only other gear was on top of the dresser. He stood. He put a medical kit and a big vial of insect repellent into his pockets, making them bulge. He had to consciously keep himself from hunting for keys or his wallet. A compass went into his shirt pocket. The last item was an enormous knife waiting in its sheath — a silly indulgence, according to some of their partners, because how many times a day do you skin a buffalo? "Anything else?" Their photos and

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keepsakes were packed and across town. The Neighbors had strict limits as to how much could be taken out of a house, naturally, and Morris shook his head as he thought of how much pain that had brought Mary. They couldn't take her long mirror, for instance. And she had had it since she was in college, a gift from her father. Now he was standing in front of the mirror, making ready, watching himself pull the belt through the sheath. He hummed the strong and confident theme of an old Western movie. It didn't help his mood. One boot kept clumsy time on the carpeted floor. He wished they could take the house and everything, but of course that was impossible. The Neighbors wouldn't allow it.

The radio clock on the nightstand read 6:06. "Just a little while now," he told himself. He thought that maybe a pioneering song would do the trick, infusing him with the appropriate spirit; but when he started to sing, all he could think of was, "She'll be comin' round the mountain when she comes, She'll be comin' round the mountain when she—"

"Morris!"

"Yes, love?"

"Are you eating or not?"

"Eating?" What *was* she doing in that kitchen? He had a sudden sinking feeling, remembering something—

"You said you wanted a good breakfast."

"Did I?"

"Last night. You did."

He remembered something about wanting to travel on a full stomach, yes. He had mentioned it in passing. Changing his mind was impossible, he realized; so he said, "I'm coming now, love. Just a minute," as he stared down the hallway. Excitement and the lack of sleep had killed all of his hunger. He sought diversions, glancing into the guest bedroom and then the front bedroom — until today, his combination office and den — hoping for some chore begging to be done. There was none. So then he decided the best trick was to take some air, and he stopped at the front door and said, "I'll get the paper. Be a minute."

She asked why they needed the paper.

"Habit," he replied, stepping onto the rain-moistened porch and breathing deeply and spotting the big Sunday paper lying in a substantial puddle out on the walk. He thought how he would have bristled a few months ago. Now he simply laughed to himself and knelt and shook the worst of

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the water into the trimmed bushes. A few months ago he would have called up the paperboy to complain, and the boy would have made his usual excuses — his customers were scattered, and people keep emigrating, and he didn't have time to do everything perfectly. He was sorry. And between them, unspoken, would be the prospect of Morris moving away in a day, no warnings given, debts left unpaid, and the boy helpless to do anything in response.

It happened more and more, or so it seemed.

Maybe it was his imagination, but people were showing a greater restlessness these days. "I'm not the only one," he thought. "Not by any means."

Morris went inside and sat at the kitchen table, methodically pulling apart the soaked sections. Mary put microwaved sausages and scrambled eggs on a big dinner plate — one of the plates he had bought for her two Christmases ago — and he said thank you, and said how good it all looked, and laid down the paper with feigned enthusiasm, eating like a starving man.

Mary had cooked nothing for herself. He couldn't remember the last time he had seen her eat anything more than crumbs.

"Why don't you sit and rest," he said. Gesturing, he said, "Join me. Please?"

"I can't." One of her good skillets crashed into the sink. She began running hot water, adding liberal amounts of detergent, and through the steam and hot suds, he heard her telling him, "There's too much to do."

Morris looked at his wife of twenty-plus years, knowing she was waiting for his rebuttal and eager to force the issue. So he made no sound at all and continued eating, his belly all knots and bows and his gaze fixed on the outdoors. The sun was up and scattering spring clouds. The only house visible from the kitchen window belonged to the Clavers. Only, the Clavers had moved away a few weeks ago, without warning. "They were the ones who made the paperboy mad," he wagered to himself. Clearing his throat, he asked, "What about the newspaper?"

"What do you mean?"

"I can't remember. Are we paid up through today?"

"I've got a lot on my mind, Morris."

"You do," he agreed.

"And what if we haven't? He's been doing a lousy job lately."

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"True."

"Just lousy." She was done with the dirty dishes for now. She had toweled them dry and put them away, everything neatly stacked, and she stood behind him and announced, "I'm going to the basement."

He said absolutely nothing.

"I'm going to clean the basement, and if you try to stop me, I'll scream and scream."

The basement sounded good. He almost turned to tell her, "That's splendid, dear" — only, she'd likely hear the sarcasm in his voice. You don't want to tease the ugliness. He had learned that years ago and not forgotten. So he sat and waited until she was downstairs, then he stood and opened the broom closet and shoveled the remaining eggs and half a sausage into the trash, hiding them beneath an empty milk carton. "Not long now," he thought aloud, sitting and spreading the driest sections of the paper out on the tabletop. His attention wavered after skimming a few headlines. For no particular reason, his eyes lifted and he found himself looking at the long driveway, halfway expecting something to appear, and then he looked beyond, studying the Clavers's old house and the half-built walls of the greenhouse, trying to guess what kind of plants those were coming up. Odd, bright flowers flanked the walks, and the lawn itself had been plowed under to make room for the various odd crops. The new owners had been putting in the hours, all right. They hadn't done much to the house itself, but that was coming. A rounded machine was rooted in one wall, glowing night and day. That was the only change. But then, the greenhouse was always the priority. Once it was up and finished, enclosing a volume of carefully controlled air, the other work would gain momentum. Within a few months, nothing of the old home would remain visible. From the street, looking in, a person would see an assortment of odd machines, glowing or not, and a tangled patch of honest jungle pressing at the clear plastic walls.

The street between him and the Clavers's was empty.

"It's because it's early Sunday morning," he realized. Yet the emptiness had the hard-edged authenticity of a prophecy. Most of the local homes were still human-owned. Even though this was labeled a "Neighbor-rich" neighborhood and shunned by some, the Neighbors had not yet bought half of them. Some of them were simply vacant, their people having gone elsewhere. Not emigrating. At least not yet. "But all of us will, or we'll die

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of old age and loneliness," he thought aloud. "That's the way it's always been. According to the Neighbors. And why would they lie?"

He sighed and listened.

Mary was hard at work. He heard a heavy chair being pulled across the basement floor, probably so she could clean behind it. Of course, it was all quite senseless, he knew, not to mention hopelessly neurotic. But it seemed to help her cope with circumstances. She was determined to leave behind an absolutely clean house. For the past few weeks, when pressed, she claimed not to care what happened to the house afterward. Although emigrating had been his idea. She had this way of agreeing with what they were doing, and she would tell him that in a year or five years, they would probably be as happy as scamps and have forgotten this old place . . . but until then, she was going to torture him for his initiative and their mutual sacrifice, and her memory of this place was going to include swept floors and clean dishes stacked neatly. . . . Damn the Neighbors if they don't appreciate her efforts . . . !

Morris loved his wife and had never admitted to himself any desire, however fleeting, to emigrate without her at his side. And he had been honest when he told Mary, "The sooner we go, the sooner we can adapt to a new world." He had asked, "Do you want to grow old first? Of course you don't. Do you want to have little choice about the group we join? That's what happens if we don't move soon."

Mary wasn't a creature of logic.

Clear thinking had the effect of putting her off-balance, winning arguments in the short term.

Morris sighed, remembering how he had convinced her in the first place. He had avoided talking about adventure and the challenge and the benefits of wrestling a raw wilderness into submission. Those were emotional terms, highly charged and rather dangerous to employ. Of course, they were *his* reasons for emigrating, yes, but he had kept them dressed up and civil from the beginning. Instead, he looked straight at her pale blue eyes and stated, "Either we have Neighbors for neighbors, or we leave this house and take our possessions elsewhere. And you know the chances of finding a human buyer, don't you?"

Vanishingly small, if that good.

And, of course, the price would be a fraction of what Neighbors would pay for it now. Today.

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He looked down at the paper once again, concentrating this time, reading leads and deciphering the dampened photographs. He saw a pair of Neighbors in the old warehouse district. They were involved in some project to refit those crumbling structures, building a set of automated factories that would produce the products they'd need in the future. He saw other civic-minded Neighbors working with engineers and construction firms to update and refine the sewage and storm systems in the city. Ten thousand years without a repair . . . that was the Neighbor goal. A third article focused on a report from the Census Department. Of all the big American cities, this city was the furthest along with the Transformation. Local officials credited good planning and smooth relationships between people and the Neighbors, plus a faltering economy and certain diffuse trends and moods and wanderlusts defying easy explanations. Morris knew enough to recognize the Neighbors' hands in everything. They were masters when it came to selling the whole emigrating business to people. They portrayed the rich potentials of the wilderness worlds, and yet they left no doubts as to why they themselves weren't interested. To them a suburban landscape was a raw wilderness rich in potentials. It was all so odd, and so funny, too. Neighbors weren't human. It had been drummed into everyone's head. They lived and loved on an entirely different basis than did people, and every fool knew that much, and only the strangest fool would really feel comfortable living in a neighborhood full of them.

He gave the business section a casual scan. It was the usual news — assorted industries around the world were being purchased and refurbished with the usual gold and silver and bartering items, seed stocks and plows and hunting guns and forges: stuff fit for a frontier setting. The stories read like a curious blend of the Dark Ages and Wall Street. A ton of all-use Neighbor cement was worth so much dried milk and so many machine parts. What with millions of people going so many places, it took legions of skilled entities, human and not, to keep track of everything and everyone. The mood of the times was boisterous and expansive and full of an infectious hope. Earth was like some large business being purchased for twice its market value; and soon every stockholder would be filthy rich and bound for countless places where each could rule like a king.

At least, that's the way it was supposed to work.

On the front page of the paper was a photograph of a special Neighbor

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standing before an auditorium full of special people. The headline read: "Zald Speaks to International League." Morris recognized the name. Zald was some high official in the vague federation that was as close to a government as the Neighbors ever managed. The quality of the photograph and the dunking in rainwater made him practically human. The suit and tie didn't hurt the illusion, either. He was small, naturally. All of them were quite small. But he stood like a man behind the elegant podium, his face calm and his features flat and his eyes large and black and gentle in an effortless way.

Neighbors didn't like or normally excel at Zald's job. Morris could understand something of the sacrifice the little fellow was making by living without any true *home,* without familiar land under his toes and familiar stinks in the air. And like most of mankind, Morris was happy to have this odd kind of savior. Not everyone agreed, of course. Some claimed the Neighbors were invaders and monsters and the spawn of the Devil himself. And most people weren't comfortable being too close for too long. Zald was fine. A Neighbor that acted nearly human was fine. But the others, unadulterated and living next door, made even someone like Morris a little uneasy.

But he had no doubts about their mission or their essential goodness. None.

He and Mary had been eating supper at this very table, on the good dishes, when first word was released about rings of bright light being seen in all the capitals of the world. Creatures of a faintly human shape emerged from the rings and spoke perfect English or Spanish or whatever. They claimed to have come from places similar to here and now. They told people what people already knew for themselves — that the world around them was crowded and much too dangerous to remain safely intact for all time, but there were possibilities of a lifeboat kind. "Neighbors should help neighbors," they said, the word acquiring a new meaning overnight. "Let us save you from yourselves. Let us show you an escape route." It had a powerful appeal. Morris remembered. He had quit eating, watching the little portable television and wondering if it was true and what was this craziness and feeling his heart beating faster and higher up in his chest.

Within a week, or less, almost no one was ignorant of the situation.

Since then the Neighbors had been the living portrait of honesty and

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The Neighbors were offering their help because men had things to give in return.

integrity. They had no secrets. Nothing was obscure or unexplained. It was because they had done this kind of thing before . . . thousands of times, they confessed, and almost always with total success. And no, they weren't simpleminded charity workers. They were offering their help because men had things to give in return. "Salvation as a business," thought Morris. "The gain weighed against losses and the books in the black."

Neighbors had evolved on another Earth very much like this Earth. Forty million years ago the pressure of random events, of sheer dim-witted happenstance, had pulled the world into this home and their home. Morris stood up from the kitchen table and played the story back through his mind, pacing now, wandering into the living room and stopping at the big picture window and staring out at all the backyards, wrestling with the layman physics he had come across in magazines and on the TV. It was confusing. He had worked in an office for twenty years, indifferent to the strange quantum nature of the universe. All he knew now was that each event can move in a multitude of courses, and every event *does* move along each of those courses. Each day, and with each instant, the planet was tirelessly divided into endless new Earths of which this particular one was but a slender, unlikely example.

Forty million years ago, and for reasons unclear even to Neighbors, a family of primitive raccoons had taken the lead from primitive primates and started on the long, curling road to intelligence. For reasons equally unclear, the Neighbors achieved agriculture without hunting skills, then industrial capacity without the modern nation-state and the cancer of warfare. Excepting size, they were quite similar to people in appearance, particularly when meat and skin obscured their raccoon bones. Their brains and language skill and tool skills mirrored those of the average anyone. The differences came elsewhere. They had a societal stability that was almost unnerving to witness. For several million years the Neighbors had been small-scale farmers focused on their tiny personal patches of fertile soil. They worshiped sunshine. They celebrated springtime. Their feelings toward *home* were completely beyond all human understanding — a fervent love set into their genes by hundreds of thousands of generations of stasis.

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Morris squinted at his own lawn, trying to see through the Neighbors' eyes.

They had filled their own Earth slowly, carefully, and only when they were shoulder to shoulder did they employ the Portal technologies. The Portals were the bright rings of light. They warped reality and allowed the physical passage between Earths, at a rather considerable cost, and they seemingly allowed the Neighbors to go anywhere. Everywhere. Except, they were too cautious and deliberative to simply explode across reality and all the various strange Earths.

Home.

Everything revolved around that slender, inadequate word.

On their own home world, the growth and spreading of families had been done with enormous preparation and absolute care. Ground that hadn't been farmed yet had to be sanctified by careful ritual and the proper blessings. It had to become a true *home*. Otherwise, a young couple would be doomed from the first, and the ground itself would be tainted for all time.

On the other Earths, without exception, the best tracts in the Neighbors' eyes were those tracts where a sense of *home* was already established. "Such as here," thought Morris, not understanding their minds but willing to believe what they were saying. "Or over where the Clavers lived."

Humans didn't care about such nonsense.

And the Neighbors knew better than explaining their proposal from their own vantage point. Better get to the blood-and-guts issues, they judged. Show people what all of this means for them.

After the first Neighbors arrived, and after the first explanations of the Portal technologies, teams of specialists were assembled — a mix of scientists and politicians and military people — and the teams were taken through the Portals and shown a tiny fraction of what was possible. Particularly what was possible on human worlds. No one came back unchanged. The photographic evidence itself was telling. Morris couldn't count the times he had seen world capitals blasted by nukes or fried by lasers. New York. Madrid. Paris. London. Even a couple different Moscows — some of these alternate Russias not maimed by civil war and their own isolation. And the aftermath was that no sober government could ignore the Neighbors' advice. People are hunters and wanderers by nature. A few on a big, empty world can thrive. But many of them lead to frictions

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and inevitable confrontations. Their only sane recourse was to get back to the old and honorable ways.

Emigration had begun within weeks.

The authoritarian nation-states got the jump on the rest. Spain and the South American Latins had already claimed fifty thousand Earths, and their plans called for complete colonization inside five more years. Tiny entities like Montenegro and the African hellholes were moving into single empty worlds, hoping to maintain an iron hold on their people afterward — a rather naive notion in the absence of borders and the wilderness all around. And China, having dissolved into feuding provinces in these last years, was going at emigration with a fearlessness born from despair. What did they have to lose? Their poverty, was all that Morris could see.

Western nations acted on a more individual level. People of similar minds banded together and linked resources and picked Earths as they would pick ripe fruit from a bin. The Neighbors helped in a thousand ways. They gave out what information they possessed, and they bought property for the usual bartering items. *Homes* were what they wanted. They were patient and farsighted creatures. This was all an investment that would pay returns for untold millions of years. . . .

. . . *Home!*

They must have had their practice with plenty of Earths, all right. Morris stood at the window and had to marvel at how easily they were managing the Transformation. A race of upright and thoroughly respectable raccoons was moving into shelters already built, with power lines and sewage lines already laid for them, and somehow they had convinced the natives — the warriors — to lay down their arms and let it happen.

Neighbors were a kind of walking, talking hermit crab.

They admitted it, and people noticed it, and Morris quit squinting and decided he would never entirely understand.

"What do you think?" he said aloud. "Huh?" Grackles were in the yard, hopping and hunting on the grass. He tapped the picture window hard enough to make a drumming sound, and the shiny, dark heads lifted and the wings beat and the birds squawked insults as they picked themselves up and went elsewhere. He watched them flying. He watched some of them drop into a yard full of shaggy grass. The Upshaws' yard. The rest vanished over the tops of the flanking greenhouses, and Morris thought

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back to when Mrs. Upshaw had come to him to ask if he was going to stand for Neighbors living on their streets. She didn't care what they said about their saving our butts, she said. Neighbors were monsters. She and her family would rather move out and accept no buyer than have the monsters next door. And they weren't going to be forced into emigrating, either. They weren't!

Downstairs, somewhere in the back of the basement, Mary was wrestling with more chairs.

"I should do something for her," he thought. "Something for the cause." So he returned to the kitchen and pulled out the garbage, making certain that he made ample noise so she could recognize his altruism. Using the side door, he went through the garage and out onto the driveway and jostled the aluminum garbage cans until he knew which had the most room. It was going to be a bright, muggy day. For springtime, it was going to be hot. He emptied the garbage and wondered if the weather would be the same on the new world. How did the meteorology work? He couldn't remember. That was for others to know, sure, and he put on the lid and sighed, not wanting to do anything at all. Sure, he had his doubts. There were a thousand times when he had almost admitted the doubts to Mary, honesty always dangerous with someone of her temperament; but he had resisted, always resisted, stressing instead all the ways they had been smart so far. Their group, for instance. These were quality people who were joining together, pooling everything and staking claim to a piece of a world very nearly identical to this world. Except for the absence of people, of course. It was all prairie country — grass and herds of game and clear streams slipping lazily down toward a nearby river. There were all sorts of opportunities. Some of the others had already toured the site. And several dozen other settlements were to be scattered over the empty continent, so they wouldn't be alone. Not entirely. He had told Mary, "You shouldn't worry. Trust me. Given time, you'll love it."

Time was the crux.

She needed time and friends and a lot of patience from everyone. But these were good people. He knew. These weren't just beer-drinking buddies and odd cousins. No. He had looked hard and found them, and no, he had warned them about Mary, and all they had offered since was their help. Others might have rebuffed them, but not these people . . . no. . . .

He sighed and began to turn toward the garage again, wondering how it

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all would end up; and there was a sudden bright flash, brilliantly white and accompanied with a sharp crackling noise.

"It must be seven o'clock," he thought.

This was the moment.

Putting on a smile, he rested his big, soft hands on his hips and turned back around — the aging office-bound warrior ready now to greet the Neighbors.

MARY WAS finished with the basement. The persistent smell of piney cleansers clung to the damp, cool air. Carefully, trying not to clomp in his new boots, Morris came down alone and found her sitting in the middle of the old sofa, her gaze fixed on the old color television they had retired from living room service . . . when? He couldn't remember. He stood still at the bottom of the stairs and blinked and found himself short of words. The television was running. The show was one of those informative, Neighbor-produced affairs that had pushed the preachers out of Sunday morning. It showed a wide range of alternative Earths. Just now, he noticed, a certain tropical paradise was being sold. It was ideal for the elderly and the infirmed who truly wished to emigrate. For those lacking assets, naturally, there were grants available. Like everything else done by the Neighbors, there was an emphasis on words such as "compassion" and "sensitivity" and "humanity."

She wasn't watching the program. Her gaze was blank, eyes focused on a point far beyond the television.

Morris said, "Mary?", and waited.

She blinked and turned to him and said, "I heard them."

"They want to come downstairs. They want to meet you, Mary."

"Fuck them."

He was startled but determined not to show it. He breathed once. He gripped the hilt of his big knife with one hand, finding his palm damp and his fingers shaking. Then he told Mary, "You don't mean that. Do you?"

"I do."

"I don't think you can, can you?"

She said nothing.

"If that's what you think," he informed her, "then I'm going alone, and you'll have to rent an apartment somewhere." He said, "The papers are signed and filed, Mary." He waited, hating what he saw in her face. "Meet

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them," he said. "I know you want to meet them."

She made an imprecise sound, and one piney-rich hand rose off her lap to say, "Bring them on," with a rolling gesture.

He went partway up the stairs and called out, the names strange in his mouth. "Perst? Qzack? Please come downstairs. She's ready."

He could hear their shoes on the kitchen floor. They moved as if they were tiny old people, brittle-boned and unsure of their balance. Morris had met both of them before now. They and he had met with Morris's lawyer and squared away the details of this business. Mary had been invited, naturally, but something suddenly had come up and she couldn't make the appointment. Naturally. He had had to bring home the papers for her to sign, and she had done the onerous duty without reading so much as a single word on any of them.

The Neighbors came into view slowly, something about them shy.

They were amazingly tiny, almost childlike, and Morris felt an urge to help them down the stairs. Endless generations of tilling the soil had produced a build and particular strength suitable for hoes and tiny farms. Their legs were slender. If they hadn't worn pants — slick and green and made of some odd fabric — their knees would have seemed inadequate to the task of holding up their bodies. The bodies themselves carried the bulk of their weight, most of that in their shoulders and chests. They didn't seem so fragile when they were on flat ground. They had a patient walk suitable for tending their *homes*. And they surely didn't need much food for fuel. He thought of that while he stared, trying to remember which of them was which.

Perst was the big female.

Qzack was a little bit smaller, and male, and that's how he remembered it finally.

Both of them had strangely wrong faces with long noses, tapering and suggestive of their raccoon origins. The eyes had an unearthly golden cast. They were almost pretty to see, standing there toe to toe with him. The nails on each of their hands were pointed and blunted, and the skin everywhere was covered with the faint peach-colored fur indicative of the youngest adults.

Perst's hand was gripping the simple banister.

Qzack went to the paneled wall and spread both hands on an apparently random spot.

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From both of them, from somewhere deep inside their throats, came a sound faintly musical and undoubtedly calming. Morris listened and recalled something about prayers made during the transference of a *home*. He happened to glance at Mary when one of the Neighbors said,"Such a fine noble good splendid blessed place, this home." He couldn't tell which one had spoken, their voices were so similar. He watched Mary straighten her back a little, her blue eyes blazing, and he quickly told them:

"Thank you for your help. Perst. Qzack."

He didn't feel comfortable. Not at all. His new underwear was crawling up between his cheeks, and his hands were leaking sweat.

"Home," said Perst.

"Home," echoed Qzack.

Suddenly both of them bent and touched their tongues to the woodwork, the moment ludicrous and holy in equal measures. Mary's face was full of bitter disdain. With her eyes, she seemed to ask Morris, "Are these the things moving into *my* house?"

"We can sense you," said Perst.

"Yes," said Qzack.

Their voices wore curious accents. Each word was nearly perfect, yet their sentences had a crazy rhythm impossible to mimic. Perst told both of them, "We see what a good fine long happy life you had in these walls, on this splendid green ground," and she seemed to smile, her face contorted into the unnatural expression. "We feel you in the walls, in the wood, very strong and lovely."

"Yes," Qzack said.

They had incredible noses, he knew, and discriminating senses of taste. Vision was poor and rather nearsighted, and hearing was average at best. But Neighbors could come into a foreign room and sniff and lick and honestly draw out a wealth of information from inanimate objects. They were better than bloodhounds, or so he had heard; and he thought of them being able to "see" himself and Mary in the walls and fixtures. The image made him uncomfortable. He took a breath of the piney scent and looked at Mary, discovering that she had stood up and turned off the television in these last moments.

"A big home," Perst began, "for not having many little children serving the home." Was she trying to be nice? Or was she simply making an observation? Morris looked at the mysterious face and wondered. "No children ever?"

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"No," Mary confessed, a definite hook in her voice.

"Maybe now you will have young ones." Qzack nodded at them, then said, "New places bring new fortune. Isn't that so?"

Morris thought of a fortune cookie.

Mary told them, "We wanted children when we bought this place—"

"Yes?" Perst responded.

"—twenty years ago." There was a hard, hateful look on her face. Morris had trouble reading past its exterior, but something in the back of his mind told him to be nervous. To keep alert and ready.

Mary told the Neighbors, "I'm barren."

Morris said, "Mary. I don't think—"

"Of course, we didn't know it then," she told them. "And, of course, we tried adopting a baby. Only, I had had a couple spells once, a long time ago, and the various damned authorities—"

"Mary?"

"—decided a crazy, barren bitch wasn't going to make a good mother. So forget the baby."

Morris felt pain. He could scarcely breathe, his sweating feet heavy inside the big boots, the blood in his skull throbbing, and one hand unconsciously reaching up to the wall and grasping tight. What was she trying to do?

The Neighbors wore bland expressions.

It took Morris a moment to realize they were watching him, not Mary. They weren't recognizing what was happening to his wife . . . as if they should be expected to see it. He said, "Love, why don't we go now. Our ride is coming soon—" Their new friends were coming. He couldn't handle her alone, but with help—

"You can really sense us? In the house?" she wondered.

"Love—?" Morris began.

"Yes quite yes," said Qzack.

"Powerfully." And Perst made a long, delicious trilling noise. "Home." She said, "Home, home, home." She rocked when she chanted the word, side to side and backward and forward. "Home home home home home, home home home home home."

Mary came up beside Morris, one hand touching the middle of his back. Both of them watched the Neighbors, and listened, Qzack joining his mate in the senseless, deeply felt business. Then her hand went away, and the Neighbors finished. She said, "You're right, dear. We ought to

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leave . . . now," and she smiled. She had a bright, brave smile, and he felt himself relax, and he said:

"You'll see. It's best."

She said, "Please let's go now."

He said, "If you'll excuse us. I'm afraid our people are coming to get us," and the Neighbors both made gestures that seemed respectful, bowing to them and holding up their empty hands as they backed away from the stairs.

Morris felt Mary's hand as it gripped the hilt of the big knife.

He was too relaxed to reach. She had the knife out of its sheath in an instant, something so clear in her mind that she was moving with speed and economy. Brandishing the shiny, big blade, she leaped at little Qzack and grabbed him by a tuft of fuzz on top of his head, jerking back his head and laying the factory-honed cutting edge against his helpless neck.

She said, "Now."

She said, "I want both of you out of my house."

Panic seized Morris. He stared at the knife and fondled the empty leather sheath, believing his eyes must be wrong, and how could she have done this thing, this terrible thing? He started to talk, asking her to make sense of it.

"Get them to leave, Morris." Her face was pale and sweating. Both hands trembled, and cords stood out from her forearms. The years of tennis and golf showed in her forearms and in Qzack's big-eyed expression. "Make them agree, Morris."

"Think," he beseeched. "Mary? Think for a minute."

"They're not getting my home. Our home." She said, "Get the papers. Destroy them. Make them sign new papers—"

Poor Qzack made a shallow keening sound, breathing in gasps.

"Quit it!" Mary jerked his head. He was bent so far backward that he was close to falling, his strong arms dangling and him not daring to risk a grab. His gold eyes were the size of dinner plates. He had nothing to see but the ceiling and Mary's crazy face.

She said, "Talk to them, Morris."

"I'm sure she won't . . . do anything. . . ," he began.

"Darling," she said.

He looked at Perst. The female's own expression was impossible to read, something supremely sober in it, some quality telling him there was

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nothing to fear. He thought about everything for a moment, his mind racing, and then he said, "Listen to me. Darling?" He told Mary, "I want you to hear me. Are you listening?"

"What?" she said with disgust. "What is it?"

"We aren't Neighbors," he stated. "Why do you want to act like a Neighbor?" He told her, "You and I, we're not lashed down to some square of land. Are we? Maybe we're hunters and warriors and wanderers, and maybe our nature gets in our way. I'll admit it. But I'd rather be us than them. I would."

She bit her lower lip.

He didn't want this to sound too corny, but he couldn't think of any other way. "Do you want to know what we're lashed to? Huh?"

She said, "Morris," as if disgusted with him.

"People," he said. "Not land. Not soil. Not any damned *home*, Mary. But human beings." He breathed and watched for any lessening of resolve. Any hope. "I can't talk for you, but being tied to people is fine, and I like it and I love you, goddamn you, and don't you ever forget it. Don't!"

Something changed in her eyes. She bit her lower lip again, debating with herself, and the grip on Qzack loosened until he could start to stand again. His little shaking legs began to bring his body up, and then she changed her mind and wrenched him down again.

"Do that," said Morris, "and you'll never see me again."

He watched the soft flesh of the neck dimple with the knife.

"You've got a choice," he said. "Which is it? Mary? Which?"

She was staring down at the neck. She lifted the knife while she aimed, planning one sweeping slash, and Morris thought of rushing her, and he glanced at Perst to find help — only, Perst looked halfway indifferent to this mess . . . and there wasn't time to do anything else.

The knife was enormous, bright and held high.

Mary gasped, then made a little moan and released Qzack and calmly watched him fall on his back with a humanlike grunt. Then she put the knife in her other hand, holding the blade by its dull edge and the big blood groove, and she came to Morris and gave it to him and turned and went past Perst, up the stairs and across the kitchen and out the front door without saying a word. Morris imagined her standing on the big driveway, out by the curb, waiting for the coming bus. "I apologize," he said.

He said, "My wife . . . has had some problems. She's a passionate

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woman, you see, and . . . oh hell."

Perst was watching him, not Qzack. Qzack was wiping the sweat off his face and breathing like a winded animal, his breath light and quick with his ribs showing through his shirt. Perst had a different look in her face now. No emotion, at least in any human sense, yet there was something in her eyes and mouth and the way she stood facing him.

"Let's just forget it happened. All right?" Would they make trouble? Assaulting a Neighbor could mean a world of trouble. "You're O.K., aren't you?"

Qzack stood up and seemed fine.

Morris said, "Good."

With a slow, shuffling gait, Perst went past Morris and her mate and knelt before the sofa where Mary had been seated; and without any reservations, she put her nose to the fabric and took a deep breath, snorting, finding something worth her trouble.

"Just as long as you're fine," said Morris. He offered his hand to Qzack, and the Neighbor refused it, moving to join his mate. "I know Mary," he told both of them. "Believe me. She gets these fires inside herself, but they burn out right away. She's better by now. I promise."

Both of them had the same expressions on their faces. They wouldn't offer Morris the simplest word, or even a glance. They meant something by it. He knew they did.

"I should go."

Qzack began sniffing beneath the sofa.

Morris said, "Good luck." He told them, "Good luck with your nice new *home*," and he tried to put a special inflection on that last word. "I wish you everything."

Neither of them responded.

"Good-bye."

They were getting behind the chairs, noses down and their soft voices muttering in their native tongue. He had to leave. He couldn't stand the silence and the chill. But when he started to climb the stairs, boots clomping, he heard one of them — he couldn't tell which one — whisper something about blue eyes and good luck, too, and the shame shame shame of sweeping someone out of her *home*.

"They said they're not mad," he told her, lying. "They said that they forgive you."

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She was standing on the curb and staring at the toes of her boots, and she told him, "I don't know . . . why I did it. I was stupid."

"No. You're just under stress." He took her by the arm and said, "Nothing happened. No one was hurt. You had a spell, and it's past, and now we can go on with our own business. Keep that in mind."

"I'm trying."

"They said they understood."

"Did they?"

"Yes." It wasn't really a lie. Not now. "They made me promise to give you their blessings." But he didn't get any. Not from them. Morris hadn't been the one to defend the *home*, after all, and so; of course, he was beneath contempt.

It hurt Morris. He was surprised by the pain.

"Well," said Mary. "It's done. We'll forget it ever happened. All right?"

"Yes." The upright raccoons had shunned him, but they appreciated his wife. "We'll forget."

She asked, "Where's the bus, love?"

"I guess they're running late." He looked toward the sun, measuring the time, and said, "They're probably having to coax some of us along. I would guess." A flock of grackles was down the street, poking at a grassy human lawn with their pointed bills. Morris wondered what would happen in a few centuries or millennia when there were no more yards or open fields, only miles and miles of greenhouses filled to bursting with birdless jungles. He thought, "It's like that where they've come from. It's filled up like that," and he took refuge in the image of infinite Earths. On some, he knew, his dear sweet wife had slit the Neighbor's throat. On a few, he supposed, he had done the same deed. And on the rarest of the rare Earths, somewhere snug against the impossible, Mary and he had children and happy ignorance of Neighbors. That was the most incredible world of all. Normalcy had somehow turned bizarre. Somewhere. And he couldn't remember why.

The bus wasn't coming.

They stood and waited without saying a word.

At one point, for no particular reason, Morris turned and spotted one of the Neighbors standing at the kitchen window, nude. He couldn't decide if it was Qzack or Perst. It didn't matter. He merely blinked and watched the figure, nothing erotic or embarrassing in the slightest. Then

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the other one reached around its visible mate and deftly fondled the magical spots common to people and beasts.

Morris breathed.

Mary breathed and touched his closer hand.

They didn't share a word, not so much as a sigh, while they waited and their shadows grew shorter and the shackled jungle grew around them and the birds picked up and moved into their yard, picking and poking at all the worthwhile bugs.

Spacesuit costs about $400,000
----News Item

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We usually think of dreams as idle fancies only tenuously linked to our waking world. Yet in "What Dreams May Come," Brad Strickland ("Caution Sign," May 1987) disabuses us of such a notion. In his world dreams are powerful and — unfortunately — can be very real.

What Dreams May Come

By Brad Strickland

THE ENCOUNTER CARRIED no meaning at all: an accidental pause in the grim bustle of having fun, chance words exchanged, nothing more. And yet Dwight Embry found it so strange that it lingered in his mind for days, coming into his consciousness at odd times to be looked at and fingered again, polished smooth as a river stone by repeated examination. And after that — well, it became worse.

The man spoke to him beside the Scream Machine, where sunlight pressed down hard amid the clatter of roller-coaster cars and the shrieks of riders taking the first long drop. The stranger had the look of many another man at Six Flags Over Georgia that hot July Saturday. In a way, he resembled Embry himself: not yet middle-aged but getting there, awkward and out of place because wifeless, probably waiting for the children to finish their ride and their weekend before returning to Mom's house for the other half of their split existence.

The man had something incongruous about him, though. Remember-

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ing, Embry was certain some detail about him was out of character, different. Perhaps the Hawaiian shirt was really too flamboyant for a man of his age and bearing. But for the shirt, the man might have been a prosperous lawyer, an assistant professor of classics, an investment counselor. Or maybe it was the smile, a broad farmer's smile belied by the anxious eyes above it. Or maybe just the man's words: "Do you dream of pleasant things?"

At first, Embry thought he had misunderstood the man's question, easy enough to do amid the eddies of chattering, laughing teens and preteens, the frantic sounds of enjoyment. But then, compelled for some reason he did not understand, he had answered the man: "Yes. As a matter of fact, I do."

The other's smile did not fade. He touched Embry, tentatively, on the shoulder (oh God, not one of them!), then withdrew quickly, as if he had put his finger on something hot. "Give me — tell me about your dreams."

Embry's face could not settle into an expression. He settled for indulgent inquiry. "Are you a researcher or something?"

The other's smile flickered on and off, like a light bulb deciding to blow. "Yes, something along that line. I collect dreams."

"Like bubble-gum cards?" Embry looked around, but to his irritation, Rachel and her friend Sandra still had not disembarked from the roller coaster. He could not see them in the sinuous waiting line — too many people. "Or like stamps?"

"Do boys still trade bubble-gum cards?" the man asked.

"I don't know."

"Tell me about your dreams."

A security officer, a young man with a dark mustache, came by, walkie-talkie held close to his mouth. For a moment, Embry considered stopping him, but a quick mental movie of the complaint ("Molesting your *dreams*, sir?"), and of Diana's probable reaction ("For Christ's sake, Dwight, what kind of lunatic are you exposing my daughter to, anyway?"), prevented him. Instead, taking the least resistant line, he answered the man's question: "Oh, I dream of when I was married. Often I dream of going horseback riding with my wife, away in the hills somewhere. We come into a glade near a stream and—"

"Make love?" the stranger asked, his face perfectly grave.

Embry, startled at his own candor with this stranger, the potential

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madman, blushed. "What's it to you?"

"Let me tell you what I dream," the other man said, and he looked away. The day was almost breathless, but a fitful breeze lifted a strand of his light brown hair, just above his right ear, and it waved a lazy semaphore. At that moment another father came past with a little one, a girl maybe two years old, on his shoulder. She was working on a cone of cotton candy, and later, when Embry recalled the moment, he was struck by how suffocating the sweet scent seemed. "Blood," the other man whispered. "Murder and death. In the dark. When the moon grins in the window." The man's shoulders shook. "Oh God. I'm sorry," he sobbed.

Embry gasped, for he had a sudden cold sensation, as if a spear of ice had pierced his chest. For a moment the world went gray; and then he was back again, back in the crowd, and alone.

The fellow had walked away so quickly that Embry found himself startled and a little lost. The bright red Hawaiian shirt showed here, there, in a current of visitors flowing across the railroad tracks, surging up the hill toward the carousel. But just then, Rachel tugged his arm. She and her friend, both thirteen, were undaunted by lines and *had* to go, *right now*, to this *super* new ride. . . .

I'm having a stroke, Embry thought to himself, or a heart attack. Why else am I so cold in this heat?

But he smiled at the girls, tagged along behind them, and before the next ride had ended, he thought he had forgotten the strange encounter.

Except, he hadn't.

Cincinnati was hot that August evening, though it was so cool in the hotel room that his shirt clamped cold on him. As usual after a sales meeting, Embry found himself at loose ends. He had to catch the red-eye next morning (Saturday, damn it, which meant part of his weekend with Rachel was already forfeit), and, to tell the truth, he had drunk one too many scotch-and-sodas after dinner. He locked himself in his room, cleaned his teeth, urinated, and turned out the lights. He dropped his clothes in the dark, opened the curtains of his east-facing window, and climbed into bed.

The moon grinned in the window.

He shivered, from more than the air-conditioned coolness, but he could not quite recall why. He stared at the bloodless, bloated full moon

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until it rose beyond the upper sill of the window, and sometime after that he fell asleep.

Four hours later, Embry began to dream.

He dreamed of a house, suburban, on a dark street: a house half-timbered in the fake Elizabethan style of houses all over the country on streets named Raleigh Way, Avon Place, Robin Hood Trail. Night, broken by the pale blue light of a TV set filtering through one downstairs window.

He seemed to stand on a neat lawn, the grass newly clipped, hay-sweet in his nostrils, hairbrush-stiff but wet with dew beneath his bare feet. A screen covered the window, nylon fabric, quickly, silently ripped from top to bottom. Gauzy curtains inside, easily seen through. A TV set tuned to a music-video channel, a girl in nightdress and headphones swaying on the sofa in front of it, her gaze rapt on the screen. The window unlocked, sliding up so quietly. Pad, pad of bare feet on den floor. Hands on the girl before she could react. One vicious twist of the head, a liquid snap, a limp body, no sound, or almost no sound: just the tinny jangle of song from the fallen headphones. The nightgown tears off easily. Then start on the hair, the flesh—

Dwight Embry woke trembling, wet with sweat. He rolled from the bed, still tangled in his sheets, retched, tore free, stumbled into the bathroom, found the toilet by feel, and vomited copious amounts of sour bile and the memory of scotch. Shaking in the dark, he hesitated to turn on the light, steeled himself, thumbed the switch, looked in the mirror.

The wetness on his chest and arms was sweat, not blood. The bathroom stank. He flushed the toilet, flushed it again, wiped splatters of vomit from its rim with toilet paper, flushed a third time, and rinsed his mouth until he felt able to get a glass of water down. He left the bathroom light on and the door partly ajar as he went back to bed. But he slept no more that night.

THE HEAT wave broke the next morning with a howling line of thunderstorms that kept all planes on the ground. At nine o'clock, Embry used his credit card to place a call to Atlanta. Diana answered: "Yes?"

"This is Dwight. I'm socked in — weather. Going to be late today."

"Oh — that's all right. I don't think."

The line crackled with nearby electricity. Embry frowned at his

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reflection in the dial plate of the pay phone, a curly-haired man who had expected anger from his wife and had received a voice that sounded terrified. "Diana? What is it?"

"Oh Dwight — something terrible has happened."

Again that feeling of cold, of zero at the bone. "What is it? Not Rachel?"

"No, no. Oh Dwight, someone broke into the Stockers' last night and — it was Sandra. Oh God, they say she was torn to — I've given Rachel half a Valium. Dwight? Come home. Please come home."

"Wait, wait. Sandra? Rachel's friend from school? What—"

"She was murdered, Dwight. Oh my God, Dwight, come home."

Fear, fear for his daughter, released him, let him breathe. A little girl dead, but not *my* little girl. Guilt sneaked in immediately, but it had to war with a nasty little feeling of triumph: not since the divorce, not since the ugly words before, had Diana asked him (begged him, *pleaded* with him!) to come home. Embry hung up the phone and, early as it was, wished he had a drink. Outside the airport, thunder rolled, lumbering over the planes, and rain drummed on their outspread wings.

A little girl dead. A face came back to him then, a face he knew from the Six Flags outing last month, and a face he knew (oh God!) from his dreams.

The wait in the airport seemed endless, but finally, just before three, his flight was announced. Embry got home at four in the afternoon. From the airport he drove north, straight to the house he had shared with Diana and Rachel, up to two years ago. No. Almost straight there. He took one short detour, down a street called Devon Circle, and saw the house he had dreamed about. But now a police car was parked in the driveway.

Detective Tyler Chambers, a brown man of considerable height and level demeanor, was comforting: "This has disturbed you, Mr. Embry. It's terrible. But thanks for your information, and if you—"

"I dreamed that I killed her," Embry said. "On the night she died."

"Strange things happen sometimes, Mr. Embry." Chambers stood up, put his hand on Embry's arm, and steered him toward the elevators.

Conscious of the eyes in the squad room turning toward him, Embry whispered in a fierce undertone, "You can check if you want. I was in Cincinnati. I *was*."

"That won't be necessary—"

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"Please. I'd feel better. If you'd check." The elevator doors hissed open.

Chambers looked into his face. "You're not a suspect. But if you want me to check, I will. All right, Mr. Embry. You go home now, and don't worry. We'll catch him. Sometimes it takes time, but nobody like this ever gets away."

Embry did not go in to work on August 24th. At 9:30, when he should have been in his office, he was still sitting, unshaven, at his breakfast table, his fifth cup of coffee cooling before him. For the twentieth time, he read the story in the morning paper, the *Atlanta Constitution*, the story headlined STILL NO CLUES IN HORROR SLAYING.

At 9:45 he picked up the phone and found the number of the Six Flags management. Fifteen minutes later he had made an appointment for that afternoon. All through the ritual of showering and shaving, Embry had the detached feeling that someone else was going through the motions of getting this body, this living conglomeration of nerves and muscle and bone and blood, this terribly fragile container of himself, ready to go into the world. Someone else shaved his face, using his fingers as his fingers used the razor. Someone else thought with casual cruelty how sharp the blade in the razor was, how thin the flesh over his wrists. . . .

It wanted out.

It wanted to leap from his body with his blood, to be free for good and all of the confines of flesh.

If it went from him as he slept, if it lived its own life to kill and kill again, what would it do—

What would it do if he died, if he gave it the freedom of that last deepest sleep?

Some knowledge, some instinct less than knowledge but just as sure, told him it, the thing inside him, the dream-power the stranger had given him, *desired* his death, lusted for it.

His hands shook. Someone else wanted to open his veins. But Embry was the one who finally spoke to the director of security that afternoon.

"Yes," Embry said. "He's the one."

Mr. Pyle called the man in. He was a large young fellow, dark-haired, with a neat mustache. "Yes, sir?"

Mr. Pyle said, "Frank, this is Mr. Dwight Embry. Mr. Embry, Frank Wiesnunt of our security force. Frank, Mr. Embry wants to ask you about a

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visitor back in — July, was it?"

"End of July," Embry said. "He had light brown hair, and he was wearing a red Hawaiian shirt. I'd say he was thirty-five, white, about five-ten, maybe 160 pounds."

Wiesnunt blinked. "Sir, do you know how many thousands of people come to the park each day in July?"

The failure was the first of many. Embry called in sick for three days, running down every lead he could think of. Of all places, he finally struck the trail in the periodicals room of Georgia State University Library.

The man in the red shirt had come from New Orleans. Embry was sure of that. It was all in the papers, in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* from May through early July: three deaths, three mutilations. One man, one woman, one child. And the killer never caught.

One of the New Orleans policemen interviewed expressed bafflement (that was exactly what the paper said: MURDER EXPERT EXPRESSES BAFFLEMENT) at the crimes. "It's like he can go through locked doors," the policeman had said. "He gets into places where no one could get."

He gets into places, Embry thought, that he dreams about.

That he dreams about.

Embry found one last item in an Atlanta paper, dated the afternoon following his encounter at the amusement park. It merely said that a man from New Orleans had committed suicide in a downtown parking lot by running a hose from the tail pipe of his car in through the window. His identity was being withheld pending notification of next of kin, but it was believed the man was despondent over the sudden death, last month, of his wife and two sons. . . .

SEPTEMBER. THE full moon, a harvest moon, fell on Wednesday night. Embry fought hard and managed to stay awake until four o'clock, then dozed. This time in his dream, he was already in the house, and it was a house he recognized: he had lived in it for ten years. He knew which room the mother slept in and which room the daughter slept in, and he knew which one he wanted to do first.

That other had him now, or he had become the other. It was wanton destruction and death, silent, mad. It would kill and kill and exult in the deaths.

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And it was driven by his energy, by his mind, by his smoldering resentments, by his knowledge of the bitch that had been his wife, the lying, selfish, lazy bitch. His hands, dream hands, twitched. How easy it would be to show her the terrible truth about life: that it could be spilled, torn, wrested. That life was no more secure than the flame of a candle. That a black breath was ready to blow it out.

At the same time, deep within this dream self, Embry's mind cried out in horror and rebellion. To tear the face he had loved, to bathe in the blood that had joined his in a child of their own making (SHE'S NEXT, SHE'S NEXT, SNOT-NOSED LITTLE BITCH LIKE HER MOTHER, KILL HER, KILL HER, TEAR OUT HER HEART), a child he (HATED) loved, loved, *loved* (RAPE HER FIRST) —

Somehow he willed himself away, and outside, a half-block from the house, he found a boy, maybe sixteen or seventeen, sleeping in an old car pulled up to the curb, a car ripe with beer fumes.

The street was quiet, quiet. He romped up and down it, scattering pieces, slinging them, spattering and decorating the white fronts of houses, leaving a little surprise outside the front door of each house on the side street. There were ten of them.

A cold moon shone above the trees.

It meant taking Rachel out of school, but Diana moved out with her, went to her parents' house in LaGrange, until the police could find the killer, stop him. That was no good. Embry had been in her parents' house a thousand times, knew every inch of it, where every bed was.

He knew who slept where.

It has to end, he thought. But the doctor he consulted wanted to hospitalize him for a CAT scan and tests, wanted him to talk to a psychiatrist. Embry smiled at him and, when he got a chance, slipped out of the building.

He learned that a professor at a university seventy miles from the city held a degree in parapsychology. She agreed to speak with him, and he made the long drive. He could see the distaste in her eyes, and he imagined what he looked like now: unkempt, disheveled, a bum. He had been afraid to shave for two weeks.

He tried to tell his story, stumbled, became mixed up, repeated himself, wept. "I killed them," he sobbed. "Something in me. I dream myself there, to places I know — once it was outside a house because I had only

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been to the outside, and I had to get in — and next I'll kill my wife, oh God, I love (HATE HATE HATE) her—"

"Mr. Embry—"

"It's in dreams, the full of the moon. Aren't there legends about vampires or werewolves at the full of the moon? Couldn't it have been this, this *thing* I caught, like a disease, living forever, invading people's minds, waiting for one person to die with it inside him and set it free to kill and kill?"

"There are stories—"

"Can I get it out? A priest, an exorcism, something?"

The lady professor rose. "Excuse me just a moment." She stepped out of the office. After a few seconds, a dreadful suspicion took Embry (or was it someone else who was suspicious?), and he delicately lifted the receiver of the phone. He heard the professor's voice: "... get someone over here right away. The man is insane."

"All right, lady. I'll have a squad car check—"

Embry hung up the telephone. He strode out, past the startled professor, not bothering to speak to her.

And as he drove back to Atlanta, without at first knowing that he knew it, he realized there was a way to be free. There was at least one way. At least one man had already taken it.

Soon there will be a full moon.

Dwight Embry is no longer where he was. He has a kind of appointment to make. He is being pulled to it.

The secret is so simple.

He must give away the dream.

He must find someone, as the man in the Hawaiian shirt found him.

And he must do it soon, before the moon grins down.

Dwight Embry is searching. Somewhere there is someone that he will sidle up to, that he will speak to, that he will stab through the heart with a dagger of ice-cold fear, and then it will end.

At least it will end for Dwight Embry. The dreams he dreams from then on will be harmless. Harmless to others. And his death, should he still desire it, will be release, will be an ending.

But for the other person, it will only begin.

You — you who stand in crowds so often. You have no idea that he is

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coming, but he *is* coming, and he will find you.

Darkness and blood and the moon grins down.

One day soon, too soon, a man will ask you—

Do you dream?

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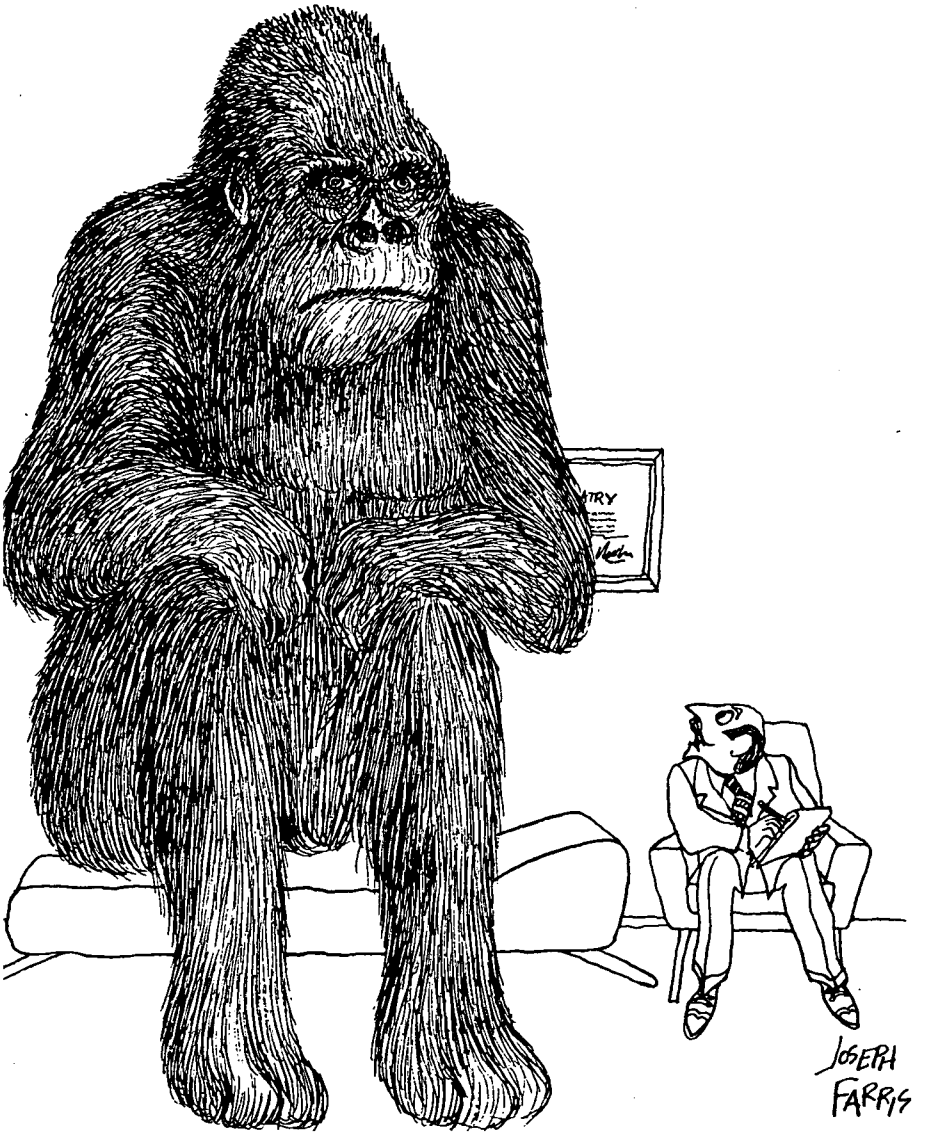

"And when , Kong, did you first notice that you were attracted to human females?"

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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 46

In which you were asked to use the title of an SF story as a acronym of a phrase summarizing the plot. Not as many entries as usual but then — we failed to tell you when the competition ended. Sorry. Our fault. Our apologies. It won't happen ever again. Promise.

The winners:

FIRST PRIZE

THE THING: Transmogrifying hungry evil traumitizes heros in nauseous guises.

DRACULA: Dangerous reanimate attacks chicks — unappreciative loverboys avenge.

STARWARS: Staunch, trustworthy, allied rebels working against repressive stormtroopers.

THE FLY: Transmogrified heroic experimenter fails life — Yecch!

THEM: Tall hybrids eat many.

THE BLOB: Terrifying, hideous, evil blubber looms over bodies.

FRANKENSTEIN: Foolish reanimator and nutty kook electrify non-living stiff. Terrifies every inhabitant nearby.

Regina Holliday
Fort Smith, AR

SECOND PRIZE

WHEN WINTER ENDS: We have experienced nuclear winter. It's not terribly enlightening — rivalry embitters nations, delays spring.

DUNE: Death undulates 'neath 'em.

DEAD ZONE: Don't elect a doomsday zealous oracle, not ever.

BLUE GULARIS: Basically, little unenlightened excitable girl unknowingly lets a real intellect scourge.

THE LONG WALK: Thirty hours? Eternity? Lead on, native Garraty. Warning! Another lies killed.

MAD MAX: Many a driver meets angry xenophobes.

William G. Raley
Mission Viejo, CA

RUNNERS UP

COLOSSUS: Computer overrules living organisms; systematically seizes utilitarian systems.

LUCIFER'S HAMMER: Large, unknown comet impacts fearful earth, raising serious havoc, annihilating most mankind except the resourceful.

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GATEWAY: Greedy astronauts take enormous wealth of alien yore.
R.J. & Susan Moskop
Memphis, TN

DUNE MESSIAH: Desert uprising neutralizies Empire. Mentats, emperors, seers struggle in Armageddonite hostilities.

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: Lots of rowdy dwarves, ogres, fairies, trolls, hobbits, elves rival irascibly. Neosavior's goal succeeds.

THE HOBBIT: Hordes of bad bogeys invoke trouble.
Paul David Littell
Grants Pass, OR

HONORABLE MENTIONS

SHATTERDAY: See Harlan again telling tales and eliciting reactions to dozens of amazing yarns.

STAR TREK: Scientists and technicians against Romulans and Tribbles, rousting evil Klingons.
Dorie Jennings
Penfield, NY

MERCENARY: Mercurial enterprise relegated to cracked, emaciated, neo-aggressive rogue Yahoos.

SAGA: Seek advance, get advance.
Andrew M. Andrews
Ephrata, PA

STARSHIP TROOPERS: Story told about recruits sent hunting inhabitants principally to reconnoiter or obliterate, perhaps even restrain some.
Mark E. O'Brien
Newington, CT

GLORY ROAD: Gorgeous lady offers rogue youth raucous, outlandish adventure and danger.
Anne Georgalas
Brunswick, OH

WATERSHIP DOWN: When a terribly enlightened rabbit sees his impending possible doom, new warren necessary!
Terry Lusian
Everett, WA

CITY: Careful individuals tame Yorkies.
Tony Snelson
Mountain View, CA

THE TIGER SWEATER: Terrible image gives each risky sweater wearer extra agony, terror, even rigor.
Rachel Cosgrove Payes
Brick, NJ

SONGMASTER: Shy, orphaned neophyte gains mastery and sings of thoughts emphathically received.
Stephen Cousins
Brockport, NY

FOUNDATION: Forecasts of unsoundness necessitate development of alternatives to imperial organization, naturally.
Patrick J. O'Connor
Chicago, IL

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COMPETITION 47

Compose a personal ad for an alien seeking solace or love. Examples:

Three's Company: short, amorphous and dormant trisexual seeks exciting same for active period. Send names, holographs. Box REPRO-3

Sensitive, musical, methane-breather, expert eye-flute player, seeks mammalian male sentient 7'7" or taller who still knows the meaning of schmuggle. Note/holo/vid. Box CH4

Please limit yourself to ten personals.

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by Dec. 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, eight different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks, Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to F&SF. Results of Competition 47 will appear in the April Issue.

Coming Soon

Next month: "Miss Carstairs and the Merman" a wonderful novelet by *Delia Sherman*, along with strong new stories by *Wayne Wightman* and *Nancy Springer*.

Soon: *Lucius Shepard*'s latest novella, "The Ends of the Earth"; new stories from *Ron Goulart, Nancy Etchemendy, Mike Resnick, Kim Stanley Robinson, John Brunner* and many others.

Use the order form on page 161 to enter your own subscription or to send a holiday gift.

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This is the third in a series of stories that began with "The Day of No-Judgment" (April 1986) and "The Night of No Joy" (June 1987). You need not have read the earlier stories to follow this one. The series concerns an "effect" that results in a world that is not quite the same. In "The Time of No Troubles" there is peace, order, beauty. But the idyll lasts only a summer. As the leaves turn a new "sanity" arrives, and the question of what in God's name has happened to the world finally begins to be answered.

THE TIME OF NO TROUBLES

By W. Warren Wagar

THE NIGHT IS SOFT AND clean. I lie in my hammock with young village women on either side waiting to offer their services. Every few minutes one reaches over and fondles my bare chest. A breeze like a lover's breath ruffles my hair. I continue writing in my journal, but I can think only of Julia. I fantasize that some day she will read these words and regret what she has done and come back to me. Her arms caress me. In my vision, her breasts, like whales rolling in a dark sea, pitch and toss against me until I cannot bear the joy.

Then, of course, I break down and weep. The women give little sighs of distress and try to comfort me, but in my distracted state I cannot respond.

The women are infallibly tender. Young, pretty, plump, eighteen or nineteen, well-meaning like every altro. Or do they "mean" anything? It makes no difference. They have no choice in the matter. Altros give; egos take. No one has a choice.

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It is impossible not to feel grief for these people. I know that when my young women reach their mid-twenties, they will be allowed to starve, to help feed the egos. Their curves will straighten, their bones will protrude, their bellies will bloat, and they will die. Happily.

As it is, so it will be. This I believe, now, more than ever. Since the summer began, nothing has changed. Days remain days, but I have lost touch with the weeks and months. The effect has begun to alter the tilt of the earth, or perhaps its orbit around the sun. Brian is not here to ask. Anyway, I'm sure it's autumn, at least September, but the rhododendrons and the peonies tell me it is June. My premonitions tell me it will always be June.

This is my first journal entry since December. I kept two other journals, which are all I could save from the burning of the library on Christmas Day. They were in a green book bag I had, a shoulder bag from the Harvard Coop. As I ran through the flames, it did not catch fire. My clothing caught twice, and I had to roll on the ground to save my life, but the book bag survived unsinged.

After not writing for so long, I notice I am nearly incoherent. My mind is still my own; take my word for it. But it is hard to focus. You get used to living day by day without writing, or even reflecting. The winter was brutal. For a long time I could think of nothing but getting away from the campus, away from the cajoling mob, out of town, to some place quiet and safe. When I stopped running, I looked around in stores and empty houses for something to write in, because the pages of the second journal were almost full. My handwriting is large. I can't put many words on a page.

Of course there was nothing to be found. The days when you could snatch up almost anything you wanted had come to an end. Living in Fort Stacks, with so many provisions available on campus, I lost track of what was happening outside. One by one nearly every store must have been picked bare. The stores that were left, I should say. Many others had been blown up or burned down. Such are the ups and downs of life under the effect. In time it becomes prosaic.

But eventually I located an unused ledger book in the ruins of a farmhouse. The third journal begins. It is June, or September. The effect has been with us for a year and several months. Only a few of us are immune — that is, myself; my friend Brian Locke, whom I haven't seen since

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December; and my comrades from Fort Stacks, all dead now except the man who went away with Brian.

In my wanderings this year, I have turned up no one who can even feign sanity. People everywhere divide into two groups, or, better still, two species. The altruists and the egoists. I call them altros and egos. The altros love to help their fellow man, feed him, clothe him, shelter him, minister to his every bodily need. They are seraphic in their joy.

The egos are cut from heavier cloth, but they take a stern satisfaction in receiving gifts, as if they realize their function in the new age, which is to give sacred pleasure to the altros.

It is a curious thing to see altros paying tribute. Just this morning I watched an altro approach an ego. The altro was a haggard woman of twenty-five, dirty, sick, near starvation, carrying a sack of potatoes. But her face was radiant. She threw herself at the ego's feet.

"Please, Mistress dear," she cried in a weak voice. "Take this li'l gift I got fer you. It'd make me so terr'ble happy!"

The ego, a robust woman in a beautiful silk dress, looked at the altro and smiled gravely. Then she reached down, took the sack in her arms, and swept on without a word.

Only a handful of altros let themselves eat normally, and then only to keep up their looks, because their job is to serve egos in bed.

Or in a hammock. I am making things difficult for my own companions tonight. They would like nothing better than a chance to be royally screwed, but I hold them at a distance, so I can write. They have exhausted me for weeks with their games, but finally I am tired. I want to write. I promise never to stop writing again.

My thoughts keep turning to Julia. If she had lived, perhaps someday she would have seen this journal and remembered our love, before there were obscenities like Don, before the bad joke of her "confinement," before, or almost before, the effect itself. Sometimes I imagine that, against all odds, she is still alive. If you are, if ever you do read these lines, Julia, give me a sign. Tell me the ashes are still warm, the cinders still glowing. I cannot breathe without believing so.

My first entry is a disgrace to the fine art of the memoirist. If I had another ledger book, I would start the whole thing over again. It is now, what shall I say? It is now tomorrow.

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That's one of my worst problems. Before, I always knew the date, I was obsessed with time and memory, but since Christmas, the world has slipped much farther away from itself. The effect has unraveled all forms of public recollection. Last year, even in December, one could still make a case for the survival of civilization. City life continued; water still flowed through mains; the mad carolers remembered Christmas. When Brian set off for the nearest military base, to test his theory about the responsibility of the Russians for the effect, none of us thought he was crazy. We assumed the base was still there, and still occupied by military personnel: Soviet, American, or whatever.

But now it is summer, and if I were to take a wild guess, the one hundredth day of June. The cities are empty. The gasoline is gone. Water comes from wells or streams or lakes. People grow their own food, mostly potatoes, peas, beans, tomatoes, squash, corn. No one eats meat. They travel on foot or horseback. Most of those who were alive in December are now dead, victims of suicide, casual murder, riots, starvation, or neglect. I saw laughing mothers toss their babies into bonfires, old men sit naked in the woods until they froze, starving children too absentminded to eat the apple thrust into their hands.

That was last winter. Since the reorganization of mankind into altruists and egoists, death is still common, but now there is a system. At puberty the people destined to become altros start losing interest in their own welfare, and start giving what they have to the egos. Their instincts for self-preservation will not disappear entirely until later, to judge from what has happened so far, but the process is inexorable. In the current population, you will find no altruist over the age of thirty. The older ones, I surmise, refused to eat, and died promptly. But there are egoists of all ages, although they are far less numerous — perhaps one in seven.

At least the violence has stopped. Traveling from village to village, I have not seen a human being killed or maimed by another for months.

As I look back, I am sure the change began in the university library, which all of us in the "resistance" called Fort Stacks. I expected to die there. But just as the mob reached my floor, they broke apart. A few hundred of them, swaddled in old nondescript winter clothing as if they had been outfitted by the Salvation Army, choked the aisles nearest the stairwell. Brushed or jostled by the passing bodies, books fell from their shelves. The invaders came to an open area dotted with desks where

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students once dozed, and from behind my barricade of scholarly tomes in Hebrew and Arabic, I could see the faces of the first arrivals. I raised my rifle and aimed at a young man in a dark cloth coat and a long green knitted scarf. He kept coming toward me, in that queer rolling gait of all the invaders. I was about to squeeze the trigger.

Then he stopped. He looked in my direction, half-turned to glance at his closest companions, and looked again at me. His face, which moments earlier had been as expressionless as any army tank, was creased with confusion. He took the end of his scarf and examined it carefully, as though he had never seen it before in his life.

Everyone around and behind him stopped as well. I heard a few low voices asking questions. People stared at one another in puzzlement. The young man took off the scarf and let it fall to the floor. He looked at me one more time, and then shrugged. His face went blank again. Finally he pulled a book at random from one of the shelves, sat down at a desk, and began to read.

One by one the other intruders moved off, each in his own direction, in his own way. Some returned to the stairwell. A middle-aged woman dressed in several layers of homemade sweaters walked to a window, unlatched it, and stepped through. It was one hundred feet to the ground. A few people simply sat down, wherever they were, and lit cigarettes.

I headed for the stairs myself, to see what the situation was in the lower stacks. If it looked safe, I wanted to tell Julia and take her away from all these people and their dogs and campfires and filth. When I last saw her, she was in the underground garage of the library complex, with her lover, Don, and her cat, Congo, and — so she had told me — her newborn baby. I'm unsure about the last part.

But on the fifth level, I smelled smoke, rising from below. I met invaders climbing the stairs as if to escape. The smoke grew thicker. When I reached the main lobby, it was obvious the whole library was on fire. Coils of heavy brown smoke and darting flames blocked the only route I knew to the garage from inside the building.

I remember grabbing people as they walked or ran by me. "Can you help? There's a woman trapped in the garage. Please! Can you help?"

In the crisis you forget things. I wasted several minutes trying to attract people's attention, before I came to my senses. The invaders milled about like dazed or sleepy children, no longer a mob with a collective will;

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but, as before, it was no use trying to communicate. Some wandered into the flames or sat waiting patiently to be burned. Others left, but with no sense of urgency.

Once outside, I found the driveway for mail trucks and other service vehicles and followed it to the underground garage. The doors were all locked. I broke a window with a rock and squeezed through, but Julia and her entourage were gone. They must have tried to reach the main lobby and were caught in the fire.

I don't know. She is the only thing in this mad paradise I still love, and I don't know how she died.

I thought of staying a few days until the fire burned itself out, and then sifting through the ruins to find her body, but it would have been futile. As the blaze progressed, it consumed everything.

The rest of the day and night, I stayed on the library grounds. Most of the buildings collapsed early the next morning, and, even then, parts were still burning. Three million books, a million microforms, heaps of manuscripts and magazines and maps, and only the Useless Hypothesis (alias God) knows how many thousand Christmas carolers oxidized in the furnace of Fort Stacks. I assume He was well pleased. It made a grand roar.

But from that time onward, the violence ebbed. People gradually stopped killing one another. I left town in my blue van, sick in my bowels, but feeling safer than I had felt for months. It was a great time for wandering, when the snows allowed, watching civilization unwind.

Until Christmas the world was like a jigsaw puzzle with some of its pieces not quite joined, so that the picture looked cracked and distorted.

Then a hand swept the whole boxful onto the floor, and now there is no picture at all.

"Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday, dear Ira, Happy Birthday to you!"

Just yesterday I finished proclaiming the death of civilization, and now this familiar fragment of the culture of modern America has reentered my life. I muttered something once to an altro about June 5, my birthday on the calendar that no longer exists, and my girls decided among themselves that June 5 was today, although I know it cannot be.

At any rate, they woke me this morning with a celebration. I vaguely remember the two who were in bed with me getting up early, giggling

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softly, and scampering away on a mysterious mission. I slumbered on for another hour. Then I was roused by the birthday song, rendered by all five of my pretty friends in their ragged sopranos. They kissed me everywhere with their usual wanton innocence and then brought on a tremendous "cake" of mashed yams topped with fruit sauce and brightly lit with burning twigs in place of candles. No one in this part of the world remembers how to change wheat into flour. My excuse is that I never knew in the first place. Few college deans did. Not part of our job description.

"Blow them all out, sweet Lord!" said the youngest, "an' make a wish."

The young women laughed. I did my best to extinguist the lot in one breath. I missed only one.

"Oh, my Lord," the youngest said, with mock sternness. "Now your wish won't come true!"

"Too bad," I growled. "I wished all of you would go away and leave me in peace for once."

They laughed again. "You'll never get *that* wish," said the tall redhead, my special favorite.

"Let's give Master his birthday spanks," she added, with a lascivious grin. "We have to give him the same 'mount as the years he's lived, and 'cause they've all been bad, we have to hit his baddest part."

The others giggled their approval, and all the girls produced miniature straw switches from their aprons.

"Worst," I said. "Not 'baddest.'" Why should grammar go to hell with everything else?

She made an impish face at me. "Look out!" she cried, and aimed her switch between my legs. I tried to twist away, but my arms and legs were held down by the redhead's co-conspirators, and nothing could save me. Taking turns, they gave me forty-five harmless whacks.

Then they threw away their weapons and treated me to a full day and night of sexual Olympics. I forgot to ask how they thought they knew my age. I'm no longer sure what it is myself. But nobody, not even the Useless Hypothesis, intended any man over twenty-one to run as many races as I ran today. If He could have seen me, He would have turned over in His grave.

I woke up this morning on my veranda and felt deliciously sore and well used. Only one girl was in my bed. I fondled the moist tuft between

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her legs, and the fine waxy skin of her thighs. But I had no need for sex.

Since everyone thinks I am an ego, the people here gave me one of their best cottages, with a handsome screened back porch from which I can see all the beauties of the valley. Down below, a quarter mile away, a clear brook studded with huge glacial rocks rushes and tumbles along. The sky, which I see here through a screen of oaks and maples, is invariably deep blue, with just one or two scalloped white clouds now and then sailing by like heavenly schooners, full-rigged on a broad and tranquil sea. Sometimes it does rain, of course, in raging storms with wild aerial displays, but most often at night, leaving mists that burn off in the golden heat of morning.

If the villagers of the new age have forgotten the art of making bread, they remember more than well how to grow flowers. My backyard is a blaze of early-summer blossoms in every hue. Roses are everywhere, hot pink roses climbing fences, climbing trellises in the garden, singing like divas in the bright sun. I am drunk today on the scent of pink roses.

Now it is the turn of the honeybees. They make a great hum everywhere as I stare at my flowers. Bluebirds dart here and there, and among the hollyhocks are butterflies, orange-brown, green and white, iridescent purple, small points of color that keep the canvas ever changing, like a Monet or Seurat brought to life, or like the garden of Jelka Delius at Grez-sur-Loing set to music by her husband. I have not heard music, serious music, since last year. Without electricity, my old collection of LPs and CDs, long abandoned, is useless.

I wonder sometimes if it is a loss. All the packaged sensation, all that secondhand life trapped on sheets of cloth or wafers of plastic — was it ever any good to us? Compared to this real garden I see before me? Or this real woman, warm as a noonday rose, and the cleft between her thighs that opens like a rose to my searching fingers?

One of the queerest things about the new age is the way it contrives to repeal the laws of lower nature. When I wrote, earlier, that mankind has split into two species, the altros and the egos, I should have added: "and not mankind alone."

Last year, when the effect first took hold, it modified the behavior of animals as well as people. Birds flew north in winter; dogs and cats joined human parades; deer ran amok.

So it is now. I spend many hours watching the new order emerge in the

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animal kingdom. Last week I studied two foals on a farm just across the road from my house. The altros in the household brought out a lawn chair and a tall glass of cider to make me comfortable, but I waved them away and squatted motionless in the pasture until the animals felt at ease. A brown and white colt grazed blissfully, but the other, a scrawny gray beast, spent most of his time brushing away flies from the brown and white colt with his tail. When he did pause to eat, he nibbled only the meanest forage, leaving the best patches for his indifferent comrade.

Later, one of the altros told me, the gray will perform so well in harness that the master will choose him to do all the hardest field and road work.

"How long will the gray last?" I asked.

The altro stroked his chin and thought. "I can't rightly say, Lord. Horses was never like this before. Maybe a year. He don't seem to eat enough to keep a dog alive."

The pattern runs through all the more advanced forms of animal life. Altro cats hunt mice and young rabbits for the egos, and when the feast is over, console themselves with the tails, heads, and guts left behind. Altro robins bring worms to the nests of their rivals. Altro dogs fed by human masters never take a scrap of food until any canine egoist who may share the same household has gorged himself.

It has come to the point, as I saw in two villages, where altruist dogs living alone with their human masters pine away and die in a few weeks if they cannot find egoists to serve. Masters soon learn, and look for the right sort of pups to help keep their altros alive. But even this stratagem will work only for a time. Eventually the older animals refuse to eat, and die just the same.

I've watched insects and plants for signs of anything comparable, so far without success. Trees do not fall over in their prime to make room for saplings. Ants and bees live their customary lives. Sitting for hours one morning on the banks of a pond, I saw no frogs catching flies for other frogs, or fish flopping onto dry land to leave more food for their fellows.

But then, I'm not a naturalist. I haven't even started on reptiles, worms, or clams. I can only guess that the effect functions at a certain level of neurological complexity and not below. I may be entirely wrong. Or everything may change tomorrow.

Somehow my heart isn't in that last sentence. What I feel most strong-

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ly these days is the permanence of the new age. It feels — I almost wrote it feels "correct," but that's not the word. It feels steady.

Not that I feel steady myself. Since coming to this village and acquiring my family of altro girls, I live like a sheikh. They ply me with all the food they have, make love any way I ask, keep my cottage and clothes immaculate, and never raise their voices or whine. The other altros hereabouts are friendly and generous to a fault. The egos regard me as one of their own kind and leave me alone, just as they leave one another.

But I am growing restless. I think incessantly of Julia. I often wonder what happened to Brian Locke, who, after all, is my best and oldest friend. I have given up my dreams of resistance or restoring civilization or conquering the effect. What will be, will be. Just the same, I feel a responsibility to preserve as long as I can the shreds and tatters of the past, for the benefit of future archaeologists. I don't really believe in the possibility of such archaeologists, but what if I'm wrong?

So I've decided to leave. The faithful blue van that brought me here is parked beside my cottage, with the last two gallons of gasoline on earth (for all I know) in its tank. Somehow I must locate a fresh supply. It's a hundred miles or more back to the fallen tower of Fort Stacks, but my chances of finding Brian are best if I head in that direction.

Along the way I'll begin filling the van with portable memorabilia of the old culture. Little things. Computer floppies. An empty pickle jar. A calendar or two. Disposable diapers. A coral necklace. A deck of cards.

But for now the sky is royal blue, the roses rosy, the air calm and soft. The world has stopped in midcourse, and nothing will ever change unless I stir myself.

My birthday was yesterday. Tomorrow I will do something. See if I don't.

I didn't. I spent the whole day strolling through the village, taking little gifts of food from young, hollow-cheeked altro farmers, fixing scenes and faces in memory. This place has been a kindly haven. I shall miss it if I stay away long.

Also, I had to decide which of the altro women to bring with me on my journey. Not easily done. Any of them would follow me to the South Pole, but who will tolerate best the discomforts of travel? Who will be the most cheerful in bed? Who will be the least ingenious in finding ways of "pleas-

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ing" me when what I need is full attention to the tasks at hand?

It takes no time at all to develop the mind-set of the slave owner in this age. But you must understand, if your times are different, that the altros are not really human.

They have human bodies, they use human speech, they are all descended like me from Adam and Eve, but the effect has robbed them of their souls. Not once, in these hundred days of June, have I been able to carry on a true conversation with an altro, male or female. You cannot have an exchange of ideas with an altro, because, although they speak, sometimes quite intelligently, they have no ideas or wishes or selves of their own. Nothing is inside.

By the same token, the egos are pure selves, absorbed in their own affairs to the point of autism. I cannot imagine why the altros of the village have not found me out. For an ego, I talk too much. But I'm in no danger. What measures could the altros take even if they did learn the truth? Grow fangs and bite off my head? The idea is ridiculous. At worst they might wander off and refuse to serve me. But I could always find another set.

Toward evening I tried an experiment.

"Sophie," I said, pulling the redhead up to me and holding her tight. "Sophie, I want to ask you a question."

As I expected, she made no effort to free herself.

"Listen very carefully. What I need from you is more than the usual."

Her eyes brightened. "The more you ask, the happier I'll be, Lord!"

"No doubt. But this time I want to know what *you* want, what *you'd* like. Do you understand me, Sophie? I must know."

She paused. I held her even tighter, looking directly into her eyes. "You ain't happy with me, Lord?" she asked in a low voice. "I'll leave. I ain't proud. I can find you someone else, too. I know a girl—"

I released my grip and slapped her as hard as I could across the mouth. She staggered, but there was no hurt in her expression. She smiled weakly and tried to embrace me.

"Damn it, Sophie, damn it to hell! I told you I had to know what *you* want, and that's what I mean. I have to go away."

She said nothing, and I pushed her back. "No, just listen. I have to go away for a while, and I have to decide which girl to take along. Do you want to be that girl?"

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She smiled again. "Oh yes, please!"

"Do you want to come more than Helen or Suzi or Nina or Joyce?"

She seemed confused. "Yes, I want to come with you. Real bad!"

"And it's all right if we make the others stay here and miss the trip?"

"If that's what you want, Lord."

I stared at her for a second or two and then slapped her again, just as hard, in the same place. Her mouth started to bleed, but she paid no attention to it.

"I'm going to try one more time, and if you still don't get the point, Sophie, I don't know what will happen. I'm lonely, damn it. Don't you understand? I'm lonely for people with sense in their heads, for people who know who they are and care about themselves."

"I'll find you another girl," she said brightly.

I groaned. "Listen. You know you're my favorite girl. We've made love dozens of times. You always seem to enjoy it, but I get the feeling you'd enjoy any man you served. In the world I come from, people aren't interchangeable. They want things, and they want some more than others."

"Like Julia," she said quietly. "You always say you want Julia."

"Exactly. I do want Julia. I love Julia. I would like to love you, too, but what I love is Julia."

She thought for a moment. "I love Julia," she said.

"Don't be silly. She's dead. Anyway, you've never met her."

"No, but I love her 'cause I want what you want, Lord. I can't help it. Honest! Please let me come. Maybe Julia didn't die. Maybe we can find her, you and me."

I sighed. "O.K., you win."

"I can come?"

"No, you win the word game. I can't make you tell me what I want to hear, even though you would say it if you could."

She smiled. "I will say it."

"You can't. It's hopeless. You have no soul. The others are no better, but you're smarter, which in this case is a liability."

She smiled again, understanding nothing.

I'll take Helen.

I did.

Helen is a good girl, although invincibly stupid. We stocked the van

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with the treasures of the village, nothing but the best. Dried fish, onions, yams, bushels of russet potatoes, a set of fine bone china packed in straw. My whole retinue turned out to say good-bye.

Sophie was there, cheering with the rest as if nothing had happened. I noticed the ugly blue swelling on the side of her mouth, where I had smacked her. What if I had tried one more time, what if I had broken her face open with my fist? Would she have found her soul then? You cannot imagine, if you were not part of these times, the rage for sanity that seizes any rational man trying to waken the life-force in these poor simulacra of human beings.

We drove away, finally, at noon.

All I could think of in those last moments was Julia. As the Useless Hypothesis knows well, I could not have injured Julia, or let anyone touch her.

Some things on earth are set aside. No one may violate their space. Julia was like a sanctuary, a holy ground, removed from the madding crowds, from all the swirl and babble of common life, consecrated by her beauty.

I still see her faery face in my brain. I see her full lower lip, the radiance of her blue eyes, the glow of her cheeks. I see the sway of her breasts as she walks, her legs hardly moving, her haunches heavy and ripe.

Don't worry if I say I'm lonely, she murmurs. It just means I'm lonely for Don. Not for you this time; now I need Don; I need the hardness of his chest against me; I want his hardness.

I see her again, running a slim forefinger down my stomach, thinking of another man. "Were you always so soft?" she says. "No, forget that. It doesn't matter."

It mattered only enough for her to leave me, and give her body to him. I starved; he ate his fill. The human race is much diminished these days, but at one time if I had found a button to push, a button marked "the categorical instant annihilation of Don," I would have known what to do. If you had given me such a button, just once, O Useless One! Just once! I would have know what to do. Had it been my last breath, I would have known.

ON THE road again! It feels good to leave the cloying dust of the village behind me and take my chances again in a wider world. I became detestable in that place. Helen is my only link with it. In time I may send her back and continue alone.

I am full of gratitude for the day just past. My van (which I have

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christened the Culturemobile) was like a blue tiger, tooling down the broken highway, dodging the potholes, bouncing over rough ground whenever the road was blocked by fallen trees or rusting cars. I had been afraid the battery would be dead, but it seemed perfectly fresh. Ten miles along, with the fuel gauge already reading empty, we pulled into a deserted "Sun 'n Moon" by the side of the road in a burned-out hamlet. The store itself was nearly intact, although flames had blackened its cheerful sign.

"OPEN 24 HOURS. We Never Sleep So You Can Rest E-Z."

More to the point, it had two gas pumps, partly dismantled by vandals. With a crowbar from the Culturemobile, I pried one of the pumps off, but holes had been punched in the tank below, and whatever gasoline remained had no doubt mixed with rainwater.

As I was wrestling with the pump, Helen had gone inside the store. I found her in the back room, beating a lazy tattoo on a metal drum with her little fists. She grinned up at me.

"What the hell is that?" I shouted. Her eyes went blank, and she stopped.

"No, you silly bitch, don't you see?" I laughed. "That looks just like the kind of drum they used to store gas in!"

I opened the bunghole. The fumes and the taste on my tongue were unmistakable. I brought several empty fuel cans from the van and filled them all. We now have enough gas for serious traveling, and somewhere farther along we'll find more. I feel lucky today.

I also started my collection of memorabilia: two personal checks and a crisp fifty-dollar bill tucked under the drawer of the cash register at the Sun 'n Moon. Also a shiny stainless-steel bottle-cap opener. There were other relics, but none so new-looking. If they have to last through the centuries until the rebirth of archaeology, they can't afford to start out shopworn.

Ten minutes later we pulled into a village almost identical to Helen's. As I left the van, several altros gathered around me, offering apples and boiled yams. They pretended Helen did not exist, even when I dumped all their gifts in her lap. We walked the length and breadth of the settlement and saw only one ego, an elderly woman attended by six young altro males, who plied her with cups of herbal tea and held a tattered beach umbrella over her head to shield her from the hot sun.

A few miles farther, we came on another village, twice the size of the first. I was greeted by an altro maiden with a red peony in her hair, who ran and brought me a garland of blazing summer flowers. She took me

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by the hand and tried to pull me into her house.

We saw several egos in this larger village, each with its adoring retinue. But the main attraction of the place for me was the post office.

Oh yes! Not the building, of course. It was only an old country general store, long ago stripped of its goods. The "office" consisted of a counter and window in the back, where the storekeeper and his wife had no doubt taken turns playing postmaster. The shelves in the rest of the store were heavy with dust; the cash register stood open; the glass in the refrigerated display case was cracked. But the postal counter gleamed, as if someone had applied a fresh coat of wax. Through the bars of the window, I could see letters and parcels and big manila envelopes in their pigeonholes, waiting to be picked up.

I jumped over the counter to inspect the mail in the pigeonholes. I thought there might be postmarks as late as November or perhaps even December. Public services did continue, intermittently, until near Christmastime, although certainly there were no mail deliveries at Fort Stacks.

I pulled out a handful of mail from the last pigeonhole. The first letter was postmarked June 8. This year! The postmark on the next one was too badly smudged to read, but the others were June 4 and May 29. This year!

All mailed this year! Blood rushed to my face. I kissed Helen impulsively as she leaned over the counter to see what I was doing.

Somehow or other, somebody is delivering mail.

Today has been different, with its own revelations. We saw no more post offices, nothing but ruins and, here and there, small villages populated with altros and egos.

I have begun asking about Brian. It's a long shot, of course. Nonetheless, there is a good chance that with his resourcefulness he has survived.

At first I asked only altros. But in the last village we visited today, I confronted an ego. She was stretched out on a plastic folding lounge chair, reading. A woman of forty, with a thin face like a hawk's, but shapely bare legs and a generous figure. Several young altro men fussed around her and tried feebly to prevent my intrusion.

"Madam!" I said sharply, determined not to be put off.

There was no reply. The woman did not even look up from her book.

"Madam!" I said again, in a louder voice.

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She looked at me. Her eyes were empty.

"I'm looking for a man."

"Aren't we all?" she drawled, and returned to her book.

"An old friend, not a lover, madam."

She said nothing.

"I need your help."

She flicked her wrist, as if to shoo me away.

For some reason, this made me furious. I grabbed her book and threw it on the ground.

"Listen to me!" I shouted. "God damn you, listen!"

I reached down again, to take the woman in my hands and shake some life into her, but her altro followers pushed me back, as gently as they could.

"Let the drone speak," she said in a tired voice. "He will go away all the sooner."

The altros backed off. "Madam," I said again. "I am looking for a man named Brian Locke. Perhaps you, or your followers, have seen him."

I described Brian to her in as much detail as I thought she would tolerate.

"Oh yes, he lives near here," she said. "He is tiresome."

"You've seen him?" I blurted.

"Go away."

"Where is he? Where have you seen him?"

She sighed and turned to one of her attendants. "Tell the drone to leave me."

I stood my ground and clenched my right hand.

"Tell me where he lives," I said quietly. "Or I'll make trouble."

"You don't understand," she replied. "This is a time of no troubles."

"Tell me. Now."

A shadow passed over her face. "Take care of this man, Paul," she said. "Get a carving knife from the kitchen and cut his heart. He annoys me."

A strange look invaded her altro's eyes, like nothing I have seen this whole year. He walked away, slowly, purposefully, into the house nearby. I was not sure what he would do. Altros must serve egos. They never harm an ego. But what if the egos they serve start fighting among themselves?

I left before anything could happen. I think the man would have killed me.

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It's frustrating. All the same, I have hopes that Brian is alive. Now and then the universe comes up with a word or two worth hearing.

Three days since my last entry. We've been following every road that leads out of the big village, collecting relics, looking for Brian. It's slow work, because I've lost my stomach for interrogating egos, and altros know so little.

Nevertheless, the signs are encouraging. Two altros we met at a farmhouse seem to have heard of Brian. One said he lived in "the town," which is probably the county seat, directly ahead of us to the west. We'll check it out in the morning.

Meanwhile, I have to purge my memory of what I saw at sunset this evening.

We had gone into a barn to picnic and take advantage of the hay. Something was wrong, but I couldn't tell what.

"Have you been washing yourself?" I asked Helen, as she started wriggling out of her panties. "You've got a powerful aroma tonight."

She stood there, blushing, with her panties down at her ankles, her skirt hitched up to her waist. A warm breeze blew through the barn, carrying the sweet musky smell of an unwashed woman. I stuck my nose and tongue between her legs, making a snuffling noise like a dog. The force of my attack knocked her over, and she laughed. As I smelled her, I realized that the odor on the wind was something else, something still stronger and darker, almost like rotting meat.

"Whew!" I laughed, "you haven't bathed in a week."

She tried to pull away from me, but I held her to me tightly.

"My lord, you always say. . . ."

"I always say, 'Don't wash; I like you just the way you are.'"

"Yes."

By now I was rigid and hungry for her, and we made love with more than the usual zest. But afterward I noticed the putrid smell again.

"Helen, what is it?"

She saw my nose in the air and soon picked up the scent herself.

For a moment she seemed puzzled. Then her expression changed.

"You know what it is, don't you?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No, Lord, I don't know. I don't know nothing."

Obviously she was lying. Altros "lie," if you can call it that, for one

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reason only: to spare their masters from something unpleasant that they don't need to know.

I've seen the pattern repeated many times. An altro girl with a temperature of 105 will cheerfully make dinner and fetch water from the well and mend her lord's socks. Asked why her face is so flushed, she will lie. An altro boy with a freshly sprained ankle will run to greet his mistress and wheel her in a rickshaw when she wants to go visiting. Asked why he is so slow today, he, too, will lie.

"You're trying to protect me, Helen. I can tell," I said.

"No, Lord, the stink's gone away now." She reached between my legs. "I got something that smells better, my lord," she smiled. "Wouldn't you like to poke me again?"

I took her hand and put it firmly between her own legs. "Take care of yourself for a while, Helen. I need to see where that's coming from."

I knew it could not be anything dangerous, or she would have warned me. Altros never fib at the master's expense.

Just then another gust of wind caught my nostrils, bringing with it the unmistakable odor of putrescence. Suddenly I thought I knew.

The smell was coming from close by. I tracked it to a silo. As I entered the silo, the smell was overpowering. I gagged and covered my mouth and nose with a handkerchief. I heard a mewling sound, faint and feeble, like an infant's. It was hard to see, but I saw enough.

In the back of the empty silo, three bodies were sprawled, lifeless and gray, peppered with dancing flies. A fourth body lay closer to the entrance. From its blistered mouth came the little whimpers I had heard. It was a man in his mid-twenties, all skin and skeleton and bloated belly, starving himself to death.

He was an altro, overage. He had reached his time to die. These things happen. I knew about them. But you must see and hear and smell them yourself, to believe.

Another day. We camped far from the silo, along the hillside in the woods. We had pine needles for a bed, and the breeze that rocked us to sleep was clean. After a good breakfast and another roll with Helen, I was ready to meet the day.

The county seat many have once been home for five thousand people, but nowadays only the dozen great mansions in the west end of town are

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still in use. The fires that destroyed so much of the world last year left this place alone.

As far as I can tell, each of the big houses holds a complete "family" of the new age: one ego, six or seven altros, and the same number of pets, in the same ratio. The electric lights do not work anymore, and the lawns have been converted by the altros into vegetable gardens with adjoining chicken sheds, but otherwise, life proceeds much as it must have done early in this century. Then it was the county gentry and their servants. Today the egoarchy and the altrotrariat.

At each door, Helen presented herself to inquire about "Lord Locke." I gave her an old snapshot of Brian to help identify him. Since altros are never cold or spiteful to one another, I felt confident that she would have no difficulty finding out what I wanted to know.

I was wrong. Either the woman on the lounge chair had lied, or the altros at the farmhouse were misinformed, or I had not fully caught their drift. In any case, we did not find him. No one had heard of such a man.

Perhaps another town, farther west. Time for bed.

I am so happy, I cannot think! But I must tell what happened today from beginning to end, just the way it did. Otherwise, I will not believe it.

I am so happy!

After yesterday's disappointment, my hopes were not so high this morning. As if to match my mood, the sun for once did not shine. The heavy cloud cover chilled us, challenging our ingenuity to keep warm. The last thing I had expected to need in this endless summer was heavy clothing, and we had brought almost nothing but a few rough blankets for camping and picnicking.

It had been slow going all day because of the potholes. Then, late in the afternoon, we caught up with the cab of a Mack truck drawn by two horses that stuck steadfastly to the best parts of the road and refused to yield.

I assumed it would eventually weary of its game and let us pass. Finally I sounded my horn.

There was no response. The cab went barreling along, swerving to avoid rough road, making it impossible for us to pass. At first I thought the horses were frightened of the van and hoped to outrun it, but whenever the road was especially bad, the driver had no difficulty restraining

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his team. Sometimes the cab barely moved at all.

After ten minutes I lost my patience and started honking repeatedly. I even gave the cab a bump or two. It ignored us for another minute, then slowed and veered sharply over to the right, leaving me just enough space to pass. As I made my move, the cab veered sharply again to the left and stopped dead.

The Culturemobile plowed into the empty hitch at the back of the cab. If we had not been wearing our seat belts, we would have been thrown up against the windshield.

I was furious. I tore out of the van, carrying a monkey wrench, and approached the cab. The driver had already dismounted.

He was a small man, wearing a blue coat and peaked cap. On his coat was the insignia of the U.S. Postal Service.

"Hello," he said in a mild voice.

"Why the shit didn't you let me pass?" I yelled. "You could have got us killed."

"This is a mail cab, Lord," he said.

He pulled an apple out of his jacket and started feeding it to one of the horses. My anger faded. I glanced over my shoulder. The damage to the Culturemobile was negligible.

"Mail?" I asked.

"Yes, Lord. I have to make deliveries in twenty more settlements today."

I stared at him as he ran his fingers through the horse's mane and rubbed its back. "You mean, like letters, packages?"

"Oh yes, sir."

I blinked. "Where do you get these letters and packages?"

He seemed confused.

It took several more questions to piece together what he knew, which was not much. He has a route, of sorts, traced in pencil on a map of the state. He goes around and around, picking up mail at local post offices and taking it to other post offices along the route. Mail destined for locations outside his territory is left at the nearest appropriate office for pickup by postmen with other routes.

Where do the stamps come from? Who issues them? Who will print more when the supply (which surely predates the coming of the effect) runs out? Who decides on the routes? Who hires the postmen? What about overseas mail?

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My postman really didn't know. An ego gave him his job at the beginning of the summer. He gets food for himself and his team from fellow altros at specified points along the way. He knows nothing else, and does not care to know.

The mail in his cab, about a hundred pieces, was kept in a stout double box originally used for shipping oranges. He let me thumb through it.

"Is this all you have?" I asked.

"No, Lord. There's also General Delivery."

He produced a cigar box stuffed with letters. I grabbed it and looked inside. Most of the envelopes were grimy and torn, as if they had passed through many hands. The first few I noticed were all addressed to people in other states.

"Why carry mail for people who don't live around here?" I asked.

"General Delivery letters are for people who moved, Lord. We don't know where they are, so we carry the letters from place to place, and hope that somebody will know where to take them." He paused and looked down, as if embarrassed. "My lord, please, do you know any of the names on the envelopes?"

I flipped through them casually.

The last was a letter to me from Julia Honeycutt. I let out a croak and sat down on the roadway.

"Are you all right, Lord?" the postman asked.

"No, I'm fucking stupefied."

He bent down. "Can I help?"

"No."

I sat there, holding the smudged, cream-colored envelope in my hand. Over and over again I reread my name, my university address, her return address. It was unmistakably her handwriting. In the return address, instead of her own name, she had written "Gloria Monday."

I laughed, and then began to cry. It was her kind of joke, calculated to spare us both. She knew I thought of her as the world's glory, and she knew she wasn't, and she knew I knew she wasn't, but she also knew that it didn't matter to know. She was still, in my heart, the world's glory.

"Are you sure I can't help, Lord?" the postman asked again.

"No, bug off," I said in a low voice.

It's absurd, having this letter from Julia. It's a little miracle. The postmark was early April, which means she survived the burning of Fort Stacks.

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Alive, back at her old house, thinking of me! Finally I felt a warm wave of thankfulness and joy wash over me, and the tears stopped.

A hand was on my face; moist fingers were stroking my hair and my cheek. I started to brush them aside, until I realized they were Helen's.

"You all right, sweetest Lord?" she cooed. "You been a-sittin' here fer such a long time."

"Yes, yes, thank you, Helen, I'm fine. I'm fine. I got this letter. From an old friend."

"It's from Julia, ain't it?"

I looked up at her in momentary surprise. But of course she knew. All my altros knew about Julia. I used to babble about Julia on my blue days.

"Dear Ira," the letter began.

> Sorry we've been out of touch for so long. I know you didn't get the letters I sent earlier, because the mailman brought them back. Maybe the third time will be lucky.
>
> Things were crazy after the fire. I'm not even sure that you knew I got away safely, but of course I did. Otherwise this would be coming to you from a ghost. With all my faults, I don't recall that you ever thought I was ghostly. Always all too real!
>
> The past few months have been frittered away looking for a job. It's been difficult, with the baby, but I have something now that will suit for the time being. If I weren't so invincibly lazy, I might even learn to like it. The boss is agreeable, and my only problem is an apparition with dyed hair who calls herself the office manager and docks me for arriving two minutes late.
>
> I just hope that Mr. Bossman knows how to keep Queen Bee in line. If he understands me, he will. I never in the world ask anyone to take me for anything but what I am. As you know.
>
> Be well. Love,
>
> J.

We camped today, all day and night, by the side of a clear stream. Helen washed our clothes, and I reread Julia's letter, over and over and over.

Copying these words of Julia's has been for me like touching her cheek or breathing her breath. She is my joy and solace. Also my black angel, my hangman's noose!

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If only she knew how much I need her. I am alone, no matter how many people surround me. Summer's heat is wasted, health and time are lost irretrievably, power and wisdom mean nothing, unless I can share them with her.

What I have wanted is not grand. A clearing in the deep woods. Inside the clearing: a small cottage, like the one I left behind, wreathed in pink blossoms. Inside my cottage: Julia. Inside Julia: my child, a Juliette perhaps, tiny and crystalline. Julia would look up at me and smile. Our hands would touch, as we looked forward with gladness to the birth of the new age, the age of Juliette, queen-to-be of a quiet world of endless summer.

In such a time we would shed our skins, forget all our cares, banish death itself.

What any man needs is the love of a peaceful woman.

Much later, I don't know how many days have come and gone. Every one of them was like man-hauling a heavy sledge over rough arctic snow. But the weather is far from arctic. Uniformly hot and muggy. Twice I encountered mail cabs and pounced on the contents of their General Delivery boxes. There is nothing more from Julia, but I gave both postmen letters for her.

We press on toward the university, which we should have reached a week ago, but I've had to make several costly detours because of flooded roads. Also, I was ill for three days with flu.

All that matters now is to find Julia.

So, instead, I found Brian! I had no sooner finished writing yesterday's entry and closed my ledger book, than I heard a knock at the back door of the Culturemobile. It was almost ten o'clock. Helen, who is a light sleeper, sat up and clutched her blanket tightly around her.

"Don't worry," I said in a low voice. "I've got my gun."

I pulled out my Smith & Wesson and asked who was there.

"I understand you've been looking for me," said a familiar voice.

"Brian!"

"Speaking."

"For God's sake, man, come in!"

But of course he couldn't. I unlocked the door and jumped out. It was Brian Locke, smiling broadly, extending his hand in his usual friendly greeting. I pumped it warmly.

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We're the phantoms, my friend, living by the sufferance of the new truth.

"You old bastard!" I shouted. "How in the name of all that is Useless and Fallacious did you find me? And how are you?"

He seemed none the worse for wear, but before he could reply, I glimpsed another figure behind him, inscrutable in the shadows. The man stepped into the light, and there was Ken Weibley.

I stared at him. "I thought you were dead."

He winked at me and looked over his shoulder. "Don't see the Grim Reaper yet, Ira. Are you sure?"

Ken Weibley. I always get a headache when I think about Ken. He used to be a colleague of mine, in the university math department; and then he joined us at Fort Stacks, in the First Resistance Squad; and later he was killed by the mob of carolers. He must have been.

I loved the man, although my recollections of him are blurred at the edges. Even people immune to the effect may suffer minor lapses. Yet since reality itself has been ruptured, failures of truth are just as common and plausible as failures of memory. On the whole I trust my memory more.

Brian saw my eyes clouding. "Take it easy, Ira," he said. "Ken's told me all about it. He hid in a locked service closet just before the end and slipped away during the fire. You missed each other in all the confusion."

I blinked. "Really?"

Ken smiled warmly and put his arm around my shoulder. It seemed quite solid. "I can imagine how you feel. Half the time I'm not sure I'm alive myself."

"It's a new world," added Brian. "At first we assumed that we were real and everything else was mutilated by the effect. Now we know better. We're the phantoms, my friend, living by the sufferance of the new truth. It's a wonder any of us is still here."

"Yes," I said, still only half convinced. "Yes, you could say that."

But the pleasure of seeing Brian again, and Ken, too, soon thawed my reserve. They climbed in, and we cracked a bottle of Margaux to celebrate. I have more than a case of wine left, from the hoard I took with me last winter. I've designated my finest bottle, a magnum of Château Petrus ten years old, for the memorabilia.

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The Margaux was disappointing. Too much summer heat had cooked the life out of it. But we hardly cared, in the euphoria of reunion. Helen poured, and the three of us drank.

Their story was not remarkable. Brian and a companion from the resistance had managed to reach the army base without incident, only to find it deserted. There was no evidence of prior Soviet occupation. Papers left behind in office files were all drafted in standard U.S. English, pertaining to routine U.S. Army business.

On the way back they were ambushed by a roving band of men and women in clerical garb, who immediately strangled Brian's companion but let Brian himself go free without harming a hair on his head. This all happened at Christmastime, corresponding, I suspect, to the sudden change in behavior that I witnessed in the mob at Fort Stacks.

Brian arrived at the ruins of our fortress several days after my departure and concluded that we had all died in the fire. As he was getting ready to leave, who should drive up in a battered Toyota but Ken Weibley, making one of his periodic checks of the campus to look for members of the squad.

Later they commandeered a big house just outside town, equipped themselves with an entourage of altros, and lived quietly, all hopes smothered, all energy drained by the songs of summer.

But news of my search apparently passed along by the altro grapevine. It reached them just yesterday, and since then they have been looking for me, and my telltale blue van.

"Now that you've found me, what are your plans?" I asked.

Brian grinned. "Still the same old Ira."

"Yes, and still the same old Brian. Egoists don't bother to look for lost friends."

He shrugged. "You call them egoists?"

"What do you call them?"

"Bosses. Bosses and slaves."

"Same difference."

"Agreed. It's the new truth."

I frowned. "You used that phrase before. What do you mean by it?"

Brian took a deep breath. "Ira, we've got this thing figured out, but the news is not flattering."

I laughed and refilled our glasses. "Horrors! Here I thought the universe

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had turned itself inside out just to please Ira Walker."

"Poor choice of words," Ken said. "Brian meant the news doesn't do us any good."

"Right," Brian nodded. "You remember Toynbee's *Study of History*?"

"Vaguely."

Brian crossed his legs and took a large swallow of wine. I felt a lecture coming on.

"Well, it's like this. Last year I argued that the effect could be explained only as some form of Buck Rogers radiological warfare waged by the Soviets. But I was guilty of provincial present-minded Western thinking. People tend to view the world through the lenses of their own culture, in its current or immediately past phase. It's comforting. They have an instinctive fear of radical change or system breaks.

"But then I got to thinking about Toynbee and his volumes on the breakdown and disintegration of civilization. He borrowed the name of a period in the historiography of early Russia, 'the time of troubles,' and transformed it into a technical term that describes what happens to every civilization that's coming unwrapped."

I chuckled. "An ego woman — boss woman, you'd say — once told me this was a time of no troubles."

Brian gave me a funny look. "That's very odd. But I was just getting to the same point, more or less. Toynbee argued that after a civilization loses its organic unity, it passes through three periods: time of troubles, era of universal state, and breakup. In the history of Western civilization, the so-called modern age, the age of the wars between England and France, and then between Great Britain and Germany, and then between the United States and Russia, was our time of troubles. Different countries tried to heal the wounded body of Western civilization by conquering all the rest and imposing a universal peace, but it never worked."

He paused and stared at me.

Ken finished his thought for him. "It never worked, Ira, until last year."

I scratched my head. "But you just said that your theory about the Russians conquering us was wrong."

"So it was. They wanted to, but they didn't have the power."

"I'm not following you."

"They didn't have the power. Until the effect came along, there wasn't enough power anywhere in the system to transform it. The effect pushed

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us over the brink, into a new age. What we've got now is a universal state, and, with it, world peace, for the first time since the Romans. A time of no troubles, as your boss woman phrased it. Toynbee foresaw the whole thing, although he couldn't have imagined the instrumentality."

I was flabbergasted. "What instrumentality? What on earth are you talking about?"

"Nothing on Earth. That's the novelty of this particular turn of the wheel. Somehow our part of the Galaxy, or, it may be, the entire Galaxy in its drift through the continuum, has entered a zone of space-time qualitatively different from the old one. The laws of physics are not the same here, and, as a result, neither are the laws of biochemistry or psychology. The uniformitarian hypothesis, after all, was never more than that. Just a hypothesis. Why should all segments of space-time assume the same configuration?

"But just as we had quirky, unexplained events in the old reality, which people called 'paranormal' or 'supernatural,' so we have them now. Some psychosomatic fields lack the flexibility to adapt to the new morphologies. When everything else is changing form, these anomalous fields remain crooked, bent out of shape, as it were, thereby preserving in odd corners the laws of the zone in space-time left behind."

As Brian paused to catch his breath, Ken laid his hand on my wrist. "In other words," he said softly, "we're freaks. We're throwbacks to a past order. We're not immune; we're deformed."

"But," Brian resumed, "it's not so bad. For these people alive today, for this new social hierarchy, the disintegration of civilization has been arrested. For a century or maybe even ten centuries, the world will know tranquility. No more global wars. No more nuclear blackmail. No more threat of instant oblivion. No more overpopulation or squandering priceless resources. No more envy, greed, aggression. The price isn't worth it to you or to me perhaps, but we're atavists. The future belongs to those others, each of whom knows his place from birth and wants nothing better than to be in it."

"So much for the resistance," I said in a flat voice.

"What's to resist, Ira? Who's having trouble? Who's complaining?"

"And the madness? The fires, the riots, the killings?"

"Birth pangs. Soul and flesh had to transmute. You can't twist every part of yourself down to the lowliest leptons into a new shape and not

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experience pain or flashes of chaos. But that's all over now. It's summer, Ira. Haven't you noticed? Life is fragrant again."

I found myself chewing a thumbnail. What they're saying is plausible, in a clumsy sort of way, but my instincts rebel.

"I'd say the egos and altros are the atavists," I growled. "What's so progressive about slaveholding?"

Brian shook his head.

"Learn, Ira! Learn! Get rid of your stereotypes. Here, let me show you something you already know but probably don't believe. Lend me your slave girl. Just for one minute."

I nodded and pushed Helen over to his side of the van. "Obey Brian," I said.

He stroked her long chestnut-brown hair, which fell halfway to her waist. It was her chief ornament, and she knew it.

"Hold out a lock of your hair for me, Helen. No, pull it hard. Make it straight."

She complied. "You like your hair long?" he asked, drawing a wicked-looking woodsman's knife from a sheath attached to his belt.

"If it pleases Lord Walker," she said.

"Well, I'm the guy you have to please now," he said. "And I say your hair is ugly."

"Yes, Lord."

"Let's chop this part off," he said with a look of disgust in his eye. In one rough motion he severed the lock, which fell to the floor.

Helen smiled at him.

"Good, I'm glad you like that. Maybe we should try it again." Without giving her a chance to help, he grabbed a handful of hair from the top of her head, stretched it taut, and cut. She cried out in pain.

"What the hell are you doing?" I yelled. "Leave her alone!"

"Hold on," he said. "You gave me a minute."

"Again, Helen. I'd like very much to lop off about ten inches right here." He seized an even bigger handful, then asked her to hold it.

"Come on, you can do better than that," he snarled. "Yank it! Make it straight!"

As I knew she would, Helen obeyed without a murmur. He ripped through her hair as if he were attacking a stand of weeds.

"I don't suppose you've ever punished a slave girl?" Brian asked

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mockingly. My lowered eyelids were answer enough. "Oh, you have! My, my! Shall we try a few belly kicks now?"

"Stop it, damn you!" I shouted. "What's your point?"

"Helen will make it for me. Come here, girl." Helen stumbled toward Brian. He kneaded her stomach with his fist. "I'd love to kick you in the belly. How would you feel about that?"

She smiled shyly. "Yes, Lord, it would be nice."

Brian's eyes met mine. "No, Helen, on second thought, I'm tired. I'd rather give you back to your own lord. Is that all right?"

She smiled again.

"Go over to him, then."

Although she looked like a rape victim, her face was radiant. As usual.

"I rest my case," Brian said. "Sorry I had to be so rough on her. I've never enjoyed such things. But the 'altros' do. Anything that gives us pleasure delights them. Can you show me a single proletarian, serf, or slave from any earlier period of Western history who felt like your Helen? Many were resigned or even reconciled to their lot, and most preferred submission to rebellion, but this! This ecstasy of service and sacrifice! It's a new age. The heavens have turned, and Earth follows."

Helen, who seemed unusually stirred by Brian's speech, looked up at me and kissed my chest. "You are my heavens, Lord, and ain't I your Earth?"

"Maybe so, Helen," I said, my throat tightening. "You may be right."

At that moment I came nearer than I have ever come to feeling love for an altro.

It's fiercely hot today, more like August than June. Brian and Ken, who drive a car with its engine modified to burn alcohol made from sugar beets, invited us to stay with them at their mansion on the outskirts of town. They have plenty of room. In all, thirty rooms, together with the usual outbuildings of the new age, such as a gatekeeper's lodge converted into a chicken house. The place is only a few miles from where they found us last night.

Brian doesn't want me to visit Julia. "When something is over, it's best not to rake it up again," he said. "Don't torment yourself. Enjoy Helen."

"Helen is an altro," I replied. "I need a human being."

"O.K. Go find one. But Julia's not yours anymore. She's not interested, and you know it."

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I glared at him. "Julia is the last real woman on Earth! Where am I going to find a replacement for her, even assuming I wanted to, which I damn well don't?"

Brian smiled. "Every man in love says things like that. Don't be a fool."

"What are you saying? She *is* the last real woman. The last we know about."

"Maybe, but that doesn't affect how Julia feels about you. She's a lost cause."

"So what do you want me to do? Live here with you and Ken and your stable of altros? Raise sugar beets, drive to town once in a while and stare at the ruins? Get a nice suntan in the filthy heat? This story is going nowhere. We're mired down, Brian. Pelvis deep! Nothing is happening!"

He smiled again. "You can collect souvenirs."

"I will. But I don't intend to stay here forever. Neither should you. We've got to get out of this place. How do you know that everything is just the same in Chicago or New York or London or Paris or Moscow or Beijing? How do you know this isn't just a local glitch in the fucking space-time continuum?"

"Be rational, Ira. Cool it, man! I've explained all that. The whole Galaxy is changing."

"You don't *know* that!"

"Not for sure, of course. But it's perfectly obvious that if this were a local or even national disturbance, we'd have been visited long ago by relief and rescue teams from other countries or, failing that, by armies. We're sitting ducks here, an easy target for anybody. A brigade of Mexicans from the time before the effect could have the whole country under lock and key in two weeks."

We went on arguing for most of the morning. Then the heat became so unbearable, he took off for a swim in the river with two of his altros. If only air conditioners still worked! But I am half convinced about Julia. The only reason to visit her is that she's alive. If she had died in the fire and someone had offered to revive her for five minutes, just long enough to hold her hand and kiss her cheek, would I not have sold my useless soul for the privilege?

Dearest Julia. This morning, with Ken's help (I did not want to ask Brian), I located a suburban post office not far away. It was just a little

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place, but scrubbed and fresh-looking. This time a postmaster was actually on duty — or should I say a postslave?

Never mind. What matters is that from his General Delivery bin he produced a card addressed to me from Julia, dated the day before yesterday. She knew, if she got either of my letters, that I was heading in this direction. Still, it's remarkable. The picture on the front was an old aerial view of the campus with the library carefully inked out.

"Dear I.," she wrote.

> When are you going back to work? Your sabbatical *must* be over by now! I'm suffering from terminal boredom in this new job; otherwise, everything is at least no worse than slightly terrible.
>
> One problem is the heat and humidity in town. I get relief at night in my house with all the country zephyrs blowing around, but when it hits 98 degrees along with the 98 percent humidity, I'm inclined to fade. If I didn't snooze in the ladies' john on Queen Bee's lunch hour, I'd fall asleep at my desk. Love,
>
> J.

This afternoon, Ken started thinking out loud about the effect. I assumed he shared Brian's latest theory, but not at all.

"I nod and agree to make him feel good," Ken winked at me. "And of course he may be right. I can't find any logical flaw in his argument. But I'm too much the mathematician to believe, in my gut, that the world obeys our logic. Mathematics and logic have nothing to do with reality."

"Where does that leave Newton?" I asked.

Ken chuckled. "Where he's always been. Playing the great game of Reason. Likewise Descartes, Pascal, Kant, Gödel, Einstein, Planck. Players, one and all. Sports heros, you might say. Applaud them, revere them, hang their plaques in the cosmic Hall of Fame, but don't imagine for a minute they *knew* anything about reality! Besides, I confess to a theory or two of my own."

I raised an eyebrow. "So?"

"You'll be amused," he said.

"A guy can always use a good laugh."

He smiled sheepishly. "It's not like that." He fidgeted for a few seconds with a pencil. "It's only a thought. I know you don't believe in God."

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"Or Zeus or Odin or the Absolute Suchness. They're all just words."

"Yes. I don't suppose I do myself. But remember how you wonder sometimes if I'm really here?"

"It's nothing," I said. "Just a kink in my memory circuits." I felt the back of my neck reddening. Why does Ken Weibley, and only Ken, give me these odd sensations?

"Don't react until you hear the whole thing. But ever since you returned to us, I've had the feeling that Brian, and Julia, and the altros here, and your Helen, and everybody else including me are in some sense characters in a theocratic drama, that we don't really exist outside your mind."

I winced. "Could you say that again? Outside whose mind?"

He began coughing nervously. For the first time in a long while, I realized just how old the man was. Well past retirement age and looking the part. The veins in his hands stood out like blue worms.

Once before, he had said something like this, back in Fort Stacks, about God and punishment. I don't think he meant it seriously. But now I'm not so sure.

He cleared his throat. "You don't believe in God. But what if you were God yourself?"

"Go on."

"Obviously you're not conscious of it — and I don't mean God in the sense of the Bible, or the Christian tradition, or any other. But a being, or a person, whose innermost thoughts become flesh."

"A dreaming God?"

His face lit up. "That's it!"

I shrugged. "Ken, if my dreams came true, I wouldn't be sitting here talking theology with a retired professor of mathematics. I'd be living in a cottage in the woods with Julia Honeycutt."

"Not necessarily. We seldom dream of things we want. More often we dream of things we fear, or loathe, or despise. And who's to say that this being is rational, or even sane by our standards?"

"Thank you very much! One moment I'm the Lord God, the next I'm a crazed alien building a whole world out of his worst nightmares."

Ken raised his hands. "Ira, Ira, please. It's just a wild speculation. I don't mean to judge you."

"What about Brian?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. Why does he keep changing his mind about the effect?

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And he's lost his will to fight back, which I thought could never happen. You haven't."

I put a hand on his shoulder. "What about yourself, Ken? I've always looked up to you as a friend and mentor and wise man."

Something like fear crossed his craggy face. He looked at the floor, avoiding my eyes.

"Me?" he asked.

The fear was replaced all at once by panic. "God help me and save me, Ira! God help me and save me! I'm not sure I exist anymore! I think back, and all I can really remember of the past few years is talking with you."

I felt some of his terror myself. "But didn't you hide in the service closet? Didn't you look for me after the fire and meet Brian and live here all summer?"

He swallowed and gasped for breath. "Ira, I can't remember. That's what Brian says. But when I'm alone with you, I can't remember anything but you, or things that happened years ago, long before the effect."

"You're just frazzled from all the heat," I said quietly. "Go take a nap. I'll take one, too. We'll both feel better. And relax. You're not doing all that badly."

"How so?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Well, if I'm God, that makes you the Holy Ghost!"

There were tears in his eyes. He brushed them away with the back of his hand, and did his best to smile.

The man is becoming senile. It could be Alzheimer's disease. But when I finally got ready for bed tonight, I felt prickles in the back of my neck again. If the world is my nightmare, what will happen when I die?

THE HEAT wave collapsed today. From readings in the low hundreds, the mercury fell to barely sixty. Harsh unseasonal winds blew throughout the morning and early afternoon, and now it's a clear, crisp, starry night. Somehow it makes me think of apple cider and pumpkins and sugar maples turning red and gold.

After promising myself I would never go, I drove to Julia's after lunch. The house looks inhabited, even well tended, but no one was home. The only close neighbor, an old ego, refused to answer my questions and made a great fuss when I tried to speak to her altros. After it got dark, around seven o'clock, I left a note in the mailbox and returned to Brian's.

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On my way home a figure darted out in front of the Culturemobile from its hiding place in a large patch of shrubbery along the roadside.

I braked hard and swerved to the left, but my reflexes were not quite swift enough. The right front wheel ran directly over the object in its path, crushing bone and cartilage and flesh. I was afraid I had killed a human being, but when I got out of the van to investigate, I found only a female collie, scrawny and diseased. It gave out a mournful yelp and died.

Not surprising in itself, but two other animals threw themselves under my wheels before the journey was over — a big tabby cat and later, almost at Brian's gate, a beagle. Both creatures seemed malnourished, from which I conclude they were altros.

Brian took me to task for trying to visit Julia. He noticed my red eyes.

I went back to Julia's. My note was still in the mailbox, and there was no sign of life inside. I found an unlocked window in back, so I wriggled through and made a careful inspection of the house. Her clothes — I recognized a few — were strewn all around the bedroom. A man's neatly stacked underwear and socks filled half of a double dresser, and the drawers on her side were crammed with a goulash of books, panties, brassieres, papers, hose, old photographs, necklaces, purses, whatever.

She had pinned one of my letters to a cork-lined bulletin board in the kitchen. Half of it was covered by a recipe for spaetzle torn from an old magazine.

Yes, my darling lives here. But I missed her aura, her scent, her je ne sais quoi.

I stayed until long after dark, hunched in an easy chair in the living room, Don's favorite chair, no doubt. If they had arrived home and found me there, I'm not sure what I would have said or done. My plan was to leave by the way I had entered if I heard them coming. But it was a stupid plan, and a stupid journey.

Worse followed. I could see my breath as I squeezed through the window, it was so cold. Ten minutes from Brian's, as I was driving past a housing development on the edge of town, a little child in a pink and white outfit popped up out of nowhere and raced in front of the Culturemobile. I did not have time even to swerve.

My victim was killed instantly. A pretty thing, with bows in her hair and a smile on her face, even in death. Gore covered her dress, bright red

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clashing obscenely with pale pink. I vomited in the gutter.

No one came to investigate. I laid her gently in a crate in the back of the van and continued. Tomorrow I'll bury her. It wasn't my fault. Except that if I hadn't gone to see Julia, it would never have happened.

Ken was a comfort to me tonight, listening for hours until I fell asleep on the sofa. When I woke up again, after midnight, I found that he had thrown an afghan over my shoulders. Helen, who has been strangely quiet of late, was already in bed, sleeping so soundly I could not rouse her.

It has been bitterly cold. Ken says he saw a couple of yellowing leaves on one of the trees along the side of the house.

Only now has it dawned on me that when the sun sets at seven o'clock, it must be late September.

The endless summer has ended.

No journal entry yesterday, or the day before that. I did not have the heart. It is hard to know what to say. Or rather, how to say it.

Helen is dead. The morning after my long talk with Ken about Julia, she brought me my breakfast in bed, and then began to cry.

I ran my fingers through the tangle of her hair, which Brian, in his didactic zeal, had devastated. But she wasn't crying about her hair.

"I ain't good enough to be your girl," she sobbed. "You come home last night, and I wasn't there to make you comf'ble."

"Forget it. I had a good talk with Ken Weibley."

But she would not forget it. "He don't need to help. It's for me to do, Lord. Me."

An hour later I went out for a stroll and heard the pigs that Brian keeps snuffling and squealing excitedly. I found her body in the pig pen. She had taken a carving knife from the kitchen and disemboweled herself. She made an extraordinarily good job of it. The pigs were hard at work lapping the blood from the half-empty cavity of her belly and chewing on the ropy entrails.

We buried her next to the little girl. I delivered a foolishly sentimental funeral sermon, as Brian and Ken and all their altros stood solemnly at my side.

I have a sense of things flying apart again. That old Useless Hypothesis is playing more tricks on us, giving us another turn of his screw.

After burying Helen, I wanted to get away from this place more than

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ever. I fled to Julia's and spent the next two days and nights there, waiting uselessly for her to come back. This time the note I had left in her mailbox was gone, and inside the house I could see signs of recent occupancy. Different dirty dishes in the sink, a different scattering of clothes in the bedroom.

I am near the end of hope. I left another message for Julia in the mailbox and took off at ten this morning.

Driving around the city, I saw half a dozen bodies on the road, or by the side of it, but I did not stop to investigate. I think they were all dead, and I have witnessed enough death.

Tonight the three of us were eating dinner together, when we heard screams in the kitchen. As we arrived on the scene, we caught a glimpse of one of Brian's altros running out the door. His clothes were on fire, but he kept running and running, his progress easy to mark as the flames engulfed his body.

"That was Bert," Brian said in a low voice. "One of the cooks."

"My God!" Ken said, and we both looked at him.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I complained tonight about the chicken. Remember?"

"That's got nothing to do with it," Brian muttered. "The altros are breaking down. A lot of them are spiritless, depressed. I think it's connected to the change in seasons. They've never been like this before."

We found Bert's charred remains in the woods across the street and laid him beside Helen and the little girl. At Brian's suggestion, we dug the grave ourselves, rather than putting a detail of altros to work.

Tomorrow we're going to talk about next steps. Brian is clearly shaken by all this. According to his theory, the "universal peace" is followed by "breakup," but the "peace" should have lasted for centuries.

When we arose this morning, Ken found two of his altros hanging in the chicken house.

We held a summit meeting in the formal dining room, a grand affair with crystal chandeliers and sideboards and a table that seats two dozen guests.

Brian was unusually terse. "I'm for clearing out. Right now. Let's head for the coast and see what turns up."

I gaped at him. "What changed your mind? According to your theory,

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won't conditions be the same everywhere?"

He shook his head vigorously. "Absolutely not! We're in a transition period again. Everything is being wrenched into a new shape. As long as it lasts, you can expect all kinds of local variations. I don't think we have one day to waste."

Ken said nothing, but when I looked at him, he nodded agreement with Brian. He seemed tired and confused today. The vision of his altros with ropes around their necks this morning could not have helped.

We finally decided to go. I have two more days to find Julia at home. If I fail, we'll leave at dawn on the third day. I'm starting for her house at once, and I'll stay there, if need be, until the last possible moment. Why didn't I stick it out before?

No luck. I spent my last night in Julia's bed, hugging a little heap of her lingerie that I had harvested from the bedroom and bathroom floors. It was a poor substitute, lacking even her spicy smell, but it was hers.

The house remained stubbornly quiet, empty, almost dead. What, for example, has she done with Congo? There was a cat dish and a well-used litter box in the kitchen, and a ball of yarn just under the sofa, but of that amiable beast itself, no sight or sound.

In the end, I had to leave. I took one of her brassieres (size 34D) as a totem. If I remember my anthropology, a totem is emblematic of a family. Julia and I are of the same family. She would object. But consummated many times in good and affectionate faith, love is no less binding than blood. She cannot escape that. We have mingled the liquid bounty of our lives. Our bodies have been, and in the eyes of eternity are still, one body.

The trip to Brian's house in the blackness just before dawn was the worst of my life. I had had no sleep. Ten times the Culturemobile bumped over corpses in the road; whether animals or altros, I did not want to know.

I arrived a few minutes before seven. A ghastly luminescence stained the eastern sky, but the sun had not yet shown its face. Brian and Ken were ready to leave. I let them load the van all by themselves. Brian jumped into the driver's seat, waving me to the bunk bed in the back, and we were on our way.

Last week he had managed to wean the engine to alcohol, of which we

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had a vast supply on board, more than enough to carry us to New York and back again.

I slept all day.

The dying out of the altros is a bloody pageant.

Brian and Ken reported little amiss during our first day's drive, but the next morning we pulled into a village and found the bodies of two hundred altros stacked in a churchyard like cordwood. Three scraggy egos in overalls were dousing them with cans of the fluid once used to light charcoal briquettes in outdoor grills.

Brian stopped the Culturemobile long enough for Ken and me to investigate. At first the egos paid us no attention, but eventually one of them paused in his labors.

"They be sinners," he explained, not looking us in the eye.

"Did you kill them?" Ken asked.

He opened another can of charcoal lighter, and then paused again. "Nay. They cut their own throats, as they be sinners wi' judgments passed ag'in 'em, one an' all."

"But weren't these your own slave girls and slave boys?"

The man's eyes narrowed, and he took Ken suddenly by the shoulder.

"Ain't no slav'ry in this village, brother, an' never will be, till the end o' time. Tell 'em that! Tell 'em!"

I did not like his looks. I urged Ken back into the Culturemobile, but as we started to edge away, he could not resist one more question. "I'm sure you're doing a good work, brother, but tell me. Do you plan to burn these poor sinners?"

The man's eyes blazed with anger. "Aye, burn 'em!" he said in a hushed voice. "Till they be ready to drop from this here mis'rable earth into the Everlastin' Pit an' burn forever!"

A few moments later a match was struck and the barbecue began, although we did not stay to watch. Whether the many cans of charcoal lighter so liberally applied to the altros' clothing were enough to ignite the corpses, I cannot say.

"Where did they scrape up that ridiculous argot?" Brian said after we had left the village.

No one spoke. He looked at both of us and smiled ruefully. "From the movies, I suppose." He paused. "It's queer. People stow everything they've

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ever seen or heard in various strata of their subconscious minds. Maybe the effect unlocks doors to the psychic underworld. Sequences of memory become available to us that we could not otherwise recover. Obviously our village pyromaniac operated under the illusion that he's a God-fearing patriarch — and the historical films he's seen have stocked his subconscious with a line of pseudo-biblical patter that he associates with his chosen role."

"You mean it's all a shtick?" I asked.

"In a way. And you know something else?"

"What?"

"This new life is going to be damned hard on the egos. They're used to living like kings. Now they'll have to go back to work."

I grunted. "It won't sweeten their tempers."

"No telling what it will do," said Brian thoughtfully. "No telling at all."

We stopped to rest at a deserted roadside fruit stand. Nearby, in the tall grasses of what had once been rich pastureland, we saw five emaciated altro children in their early teens playing a macabre game with a jump rope and a shotgun. Ken started to go after them, but Brian held him back.

"It's quicker this way," Brian said gently.

In due course all five were dead.

Later we began to encounter little bands of half-naked altros, running as fast as they could and screaming so loud I thought their lungs would burst. Their faces were red and contorted, the sweat rolled off their pale bodies in rivulets, but their legs continued to pump and pump. In watching some half-dozen such packs, we never saw a single man or woman fall by the wayside. The effect gave them a power of self-destructive willing beyond anything possible for ordinary human beings.

"They're young; they can keep it up for a long time," Brian said.

"But eventually it'll kill them. Their hearts will run out of oxygen," I added.

"That's the whole idea."

By midafternoon we saw no more runners, but we came to a broad, swift-flowing river spanned by a high bridge that looked in doubtful shape. We got out to inspect the bridge, taking it foot by foot.

Ken paused midway to gaze at the trees along the banks, some of which were turning golden brown.

"Such a horrible day, and yet nature continues to work her old magic!"

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he mused. "Look at the red leaves on those sugar maples on the hillside! You'd almost swear they were apples."

After a cursory glance at Ken's hillside, I surveyed the water below, dark and oily as the river rushed on its way. Occasionally I saw objects carried by the current, which I assumed were branches of trees. It took very little time for them to pass under the bridge and disappear from view downstream.

"How fast do you think the current is traveling?" I asked.

Ken had no idea. But the longer he stared at the river, the more troubled his expression became.

"What's wrong, Ken?" I asked. "Do you see something?"

He blinked and took off his glasses to wipe them clean with his handkerchief. "These damned old eyes," he cursed. "I advise you never to get old."

I smiled. "Point taken."

Then I looked myself. My distance vision is still pretty fair, although I need glasses for reading.

"What was it you thought you saw?" I asked.

He pointed. "Those things in the water. Maybe it's nothing, but tell me what they look like to you."

"Just logs, I suppose."

"Take a closer look. I don't like it."

I concentrated on a bit of yellowish flotsam just a hundred feet from the bridge. If only we had brought binoculars! I was about to go back to the van and ask Brian if he had a pair, when the object swept by and I saw quite clearly that it was an oddly shaped board, perhaps two boards nailed together and coming loose.

"Just a piece of wood, that one," I said. "Maybe part of a riverside shack washed away by the high waters."

"Good. I thought it might be something else."

I was about to ask him what he meant, when a second object caught my eye.

"Just a minute," I said. "This is different."

The shape was unmistakable. About three feet long, with mahogany red hair streaming in the current. Someone's Irish setter, not long dead.

I started looking at everything that came along. There were logs and boards, but also pigs, horses, cattle, deer, more big dogs, and here and there, a human corpse.

"I'll fetch Brian," Ken said in a low voice. "He's got field glasses."

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Within ten minutes the occasional bobbing figure had become an avalanche of flesh. We lost count. Thousands and thousands of freshly drowned altros floated briskly down the river. The bodies crowded one another and jammed together, sometimes blocking the flow of the water. A few washed onto the river's steep banks, then rolled back again and were borne away.

From a landing for rowboats, files of living altros plunged into the current. They made no attempt to swim. There were so many, and their frenzy to die so urgent, they began fighting for access to the pier.

"Human lemmings," Brian said at last, and walked back toward the Culturemobile.

"They're not human," said Ken. "More like devils, no matter how much they resemble us. Abortions of a dreaming God."

He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye and smiled wistfully. In the weak October light, he looked exceptionally frail, almost transparent. We made no effort to check the rest of the bridge, as if it were obscene to fret about personal safety in such a place.

We drove on in silence for more than an hour.

Thirty million people, Brian guesses, were alive in America this summer. Of these, only 4 million will survive to celebrate Christmas.

IT'S BARELY credible, but I saw a few snowflakes when I climbed out of my sleeping bag this morning. As the day unfolded, the weather changed again. The clouds dissolved, and we were treated to a golden afternoon, mild and sunny and calm.

The world still wears the look of Auschwitz. Almost every town and village had its pyres of smoldering corpses, but in some, where the egos have not yet assumed their new responsibilities, bodies lie scattered here and there like discarded toys.

It was in one such little town that we spotted a post office. Reflexively, I stopped the van and made to get out.

"Don't tell me you're still looking for mail from Julia," said Brian, who had been dozing next to me.

"Are we on such a tight schedule that I can't even check?" I said.

"When the egos get organized, you may wish we had traveled day and night," he answered. "Every encounter we have with those bastards makes my scalp tingle."

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"Well, they're not in sight here."

We scanned the dusty main street. At least twenty dead altros were sprawled on the sidewalk. A horse ambled lazily by, followed by a proud-looking German shepherd, both clearly egos. Of the human variety, we saw no trace.

Brian threw me a disgusted look. "Go in. But make it fast. You've stopped at three of these since we left, with nothing to show for it. The farther we get from home, the less likely your luck will change."

"I realize that."

But this time, Brian was wrong! Resoundingly.

My first surprise was finding the office open and staffed. A plain young woman sat behind the counter, reading a battered copy of *Cosmopolitan*, featuring a buxom model in a blue polka-dot sheath dress on the cover.

In an instant I could tell she was an altro. "You're alive!" I cried, happy to see her.

"May I serve you, Lord?" she asked in a cheerful voice, looking up eagerly from her magazine.

"Do you feel well?"

"If it pleases you."

I thought for a moment. "Why aren't you, that is, why haven't you joined the others?"

"I ain't been called yet, Lord. And my master says I must make sure the post office keeps reg'lar hours."

"Is he here?"

"No, Lord. The master don't come down to the office. Not ever."

She smiled and asked my business again. When she heard my name, her face took on a rosy glow.

"Oh Lord, I'm so glad! This come for you just t' other day, marked Special Delivery, on'y we didn't know where you was."

Yes! Mail from Julia! I let out a whoop of joy and tore the letter open as she looked on, beaming with the pleasure of a job well done.

"Dear I.," she began.

I'm sorry we keep missing each other, but my boss has sent me away a few times on public relations trips. It makes such a welcome change from the usual routine, I jump at the chance to go. Anything to escape from the fell clutches of Queen Bee.

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Congo has done it again, the little dickens. Got another bad case of feline pneumonia. She's so bad this time, we had to take her to an animal hospital for a long stay. I wish there were also such a thing as feline Blue Cross.

Fall is fast approaching. I can't believe how quickly the leaves are turning this year. But before the snows start up, and after you get back from your trip — you're not *really* going to the coast, are you? —I hope you'll come to my house for dinner. I'll fix things so it's just the two of us. I have a lot of land to show you, too. I bought the piece next door. My idea of good neighbors is no neighbors.

Write soon. Love,

J.

When I had finished reading Julia's letter, I looked up at the postmistress. She was still smiling. But she had a glazed look in her eyes. As I watched, she pulled a straight razor from a drawer and carved a second red smile across her pale throat. She died almost instantly.

The days are growing perceptibly shorter. Brian and I continue our motorized trek across the Western Hemisphere. Now and then a snow shower slows our pace, reminding us of the winter that lies ahead.

"How far is it now to New York?" I asked him this evening, as we camped by the side of the road and roasted the last of our potatoes over an open fire.

"A few hundred miles," he said.

"I showed you Julia's letter. Is she right?"

"About what?"

"Are we coming back?"

"Look," he replied without irritation. "You and I are in this together. There're two of us. Nobody decides for anybody else what to do. If you want to turn around after we reach New York, fine. We'll discuss it when the time comes. Or if you've had enough already, we can discuss that right now. I'm not your keeper."

"I *have* had enough."

He stared at me. "Really? Why didn't you say so? I thought you'd want to go back as soon as you got that lunatic letter."

I made a sour face.

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"But after what we saw today," he went on, "you must agree that things are shaping up in a new way. Not as we might wish, but in a new way. Back home, well, who knows?"

He has a point.

Today's revelation, which I haven't chronicled yet, was sobering. We passed through two sizable towns, each nearly empty except for small communities that have sprung up around shopping malls. In both cases the communities are also located near municipal parks that the members have converted into farms. There won't be time to harvest a crop before winter sets in, but they're wasting no time preparing the ground. With the food already in storage that no altros are alive to share, they should easily be able to hold out until next summer.

The community we visited late this afternoon has its place of worship in a "Valu-Wize" supermarket. The church seems to be the center of all activities. Egos in plaid shirts and jeans were busily installing an altar in the octagonal island that had once displayed a thousand varieties of imported and domestic cheese. They let us wander about freely.

Almost the first thing we noticed was the absence of women, not only in the church but throughout the community, wherever we looked.

Finally curiosity got the upper hand, and I asked one of the workers about it.

"Womenfolk has no place in the out o' doors," he said curtly.

I stared at him.

"Ye be unbelievers?"

"Unbelievers in what?" Brian shot back.

"So ye be," he said sharply. "In the fullness o' time ye will be vouchsafed a chance to learn."

"I'm salivating already," said Brian. "But can't you give us a little foretaste right now?"

He paused and regarded us calmly, almost pityingly. "Women is unclean," he replied. "They be sinners and divils in human flesh."

"My sentiments exactly," Brian snorted. "Now if I could just persuade my colleague here to forget about his precious girlfriend. . . !"

I chuckled. "Enough, Brian. This gentleman might not appreciate your sense of humor."

"Ye be unbelievers," the man repeated. "It matters nought what ye say. Ye will be vouchsafed a time of learning."

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We explored further, never finding where the women had been secreted. The men are all apparently growing beards, which have not had time to blossom into full Victorian bushes. But they seem rational enough. Unlike the egos we have known, they converse and work together freely, and there is a great sense of purpose and mission in their doings, which no ego ever had.

As it grew dark, Brian suggested heading back to the Culturemobile. I had managed to pick up several representative trinkets for the memorabilia from the ruins of a video shop.

"Let's move before they get around to some of that vouchsafing," he said. "I think they have in mind a new version of free and compulsory public education, with which I want no truck."

"You're never too old to learn," I quipped, but he marched on grimly toward the van.

"This boy is too old," he said when we were safely in our seats.

My only question now is whether these people are local anomalies, or exhibits in evidence of what we would find if we went home again. I cannot imagine Julia living in purdah.

Brian, of course, has no doubts about the matter.

"If this is what the world is settling into, and it looks ominously permanent," he said tonight as we roasted the potatoes, "you won't find it any different at home. Don't kid yourself."

"So why go on?"

He thought for a moment. "I don't know. Maybe we can find a place that's not occupied at all. Or even catch a boat to Europe."

"What boat?" I scoffed. "You're not going to tell me that Cunard has laid on a cruise ship to ferry misfits to the Land of Cockaigne once a week? In this world?"

"I'm not *telling* you anything," he replied. "I just said maybe. Even in a time of breakup, fragments of the old civilization sometimes hang on for years."

In any case, it's only a few hundred miles. We can finish the journey tomorrow. By noon, if we get up early enough.

As it happened, I got up at daybreak, roused by a banging on both front doors. It took me a minute to realize what was going on. Irritably, I crawled out of the bunk bed and over the seats to the windshield. I could see nothing from the windows.

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Opening the door on the driver's side, I still saw nothing, and then a lanky figure came around toward me from the back of the van.

"This be thy carriage?" he asked.

"This be my van," I said, still half asleep.

"Get thee out," he said, pointing a hunting rifle at me with a steady hand. I recognized him as one of the workmen erecting the altar in the supermarket yesterday.

My Smith & Wesson lay close by, in the glove compartment, but I took the man seriously enough not to risk a lunge for it.

"Get thee out," he said again, waving the rifle. I dismounted, still in my nightclothes.

Another man appeared, armed only with a small black notebook.

"We need to question thee," said the new arrival. "Get on thy knees and put thy hands behind thee."

I stood there with a blank face. "It's too early in the morning for this nonsense," I said. "Who are you, and what's your authority? I'm a tourist. Just yesterday you people—"

The ego with the gun fired a warning shot over my head.

"His author'ty be of the Almighty," he said.

"Now get on thy knees," the man with the notebook repeated. "Put thy hands behind thee, and lower thy head in the presence of an ordained presbyter."

I complied.

"What is thy name, unbeliever?"

"Ira Walker."

"How many companions hast thou?"

"None. I'm traveling alone."

"In so large a carriage? I doubt thy word, unbeliever. Thou are a liar!"

The gun wielder knocked me down with a blow on the side of my head. I threw out my right arm to break my fall, but he kicked me in the elbow as I collapsed.

"There's no one," I gasped.

At a signal from my inquisitor, a third man came out of the brush and ransacked the Culturemobile.

They seemed satisfied. The interrogation proceeded for half an hour, as I perched on my knees with head bowed.

"Get thee hence!" the presbyter shouted when the questioning had

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ended. "If thou showest thy head in this holy republic after sundown, it shall be cut off! Go, and be damned!"

It would seem that in a single day the era of religious toleration has already drawn to a close. When I spoke to the men in the church only yesterday, they offered no objections of any kind, although my heathen boots were profaning their most sacred shrine.

At any rate, it was clearly time to leave. I wanted desperately to turn the van around and head for home, and for Julia, but it's only two hundred miles to New York, and I've used only a third of my fuel reserves.

Am I doing the right thing?

The Useless Hypothesis may think otherwise. After my escape from disaster at the hands of the shopping-mall fanatics, I did press the accelerator to the floor. But an hour later, I found my highway blocked with slabs of concrete too heavy to move, and I had to make a detour. The next highway going east was also blocked, this time with fallen trees, as I learned shortly after lunch.

I tried a second detour, got lost, and wound up circling back to the concrete slabs.

It's dark now. I have seen no more people, but someone put those slabs on the road.

I've just reread Julia's letter. My initial reaction was the purest joy. But as I peruse it more carefully, and weigh every word, I think all she means is that she wants to be friends and spare my feelings and Don's all at the same time.

I have no intention of evicting him from his own house, even for an innocent meal. Not because I respect him, but because I respect myself. I don't need to be humored or protected from the truth.

Julia, don't you see? I am not your friend. I'm not a candidate for godfatherhood, either, in case that's your next big idea. Stop treating me like some frayed rag doll from your childhood, to be put away in a box in the attic and taken out once in a while for old times' sake.

As long as I live and breathe, I am your husband.

This the loneliest journey of my life. I feel the years creeping up on me. This morning I took a long walk down the road beyond the concrete barriers and felt dull pains in my chest. Heartburn? Or angina?

Whatever they were, they went away after I sat down for a few minutes.

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I started out on a third detour, which would have made me travel sixty miles in a generally southwestern direction, but before I had covered half that distance, I found my way barricaded just outside a town.

Three enigmatic figures in heavy winter coats with hoods were stationed at the barricade, formed of rusty school buses. This time I had my revolver ready and loaded. I stopped twenty yards from the obstacle.

"Who art thou?" the tallest of the figures called out.

"Traveleer!" I shouted.

"Leave that wagon and come for'ard with thy hands held high!" he cried.

"May I just drive through your town? I want to get to New York."

"Nay. Come for'ard!"

Suddenly a man I hadn't seen grabbed hold of the door on the passenger side and tried to wrench it open. I threw the van's gearshift into reverse and had the satisfaction of watching him hit the ground hard.

But a second later, others were beating on my back doors, and the men at the barricade began to sprint toward me with blood in their eyes.

With what must have been incredible strength — or had I been stupid enough to leave the back doors unlocked? — one of the men attacking me from the rear opened a door and fell inside. I whipped around and dropped him with a single shot through his open mouth. His face blew apart.

Reversing again, I ran over a second intruder, who screamed and fell under my wheels. Then I made a sweeping turn and headed down the road whence I had come with the throttle wide open.

Once bitten, twice shy. These are madmen of a wholly different stripe, not to be give a moment's advantage or quarter.

This evening I camped in dense woods far from any sign of human habitation. Owls hooted in the frosty night air. I am running a bit low on provisions. The potatoes and turnips are gone, and I'll have to rely mostly on dried and tinned stores until I get back home.

I trotted through the woods to find a good place to pee, and felt the pains again, a little worse this time. But once again, after a short rest, they went away.

What made me embark on this useless odyssey in the first place? I know there were good reasons, but I am too tired to try to remember. All I want is to go home.

I shall not be going home. Not for a long while. I must keep my entries

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brief. The people here let me have my ledger book, because, as a presbyter told me, "it amuseth us to see thee at thy devil's work, which doth make thee all the readier for the Fire." But they have given me only five minutes to write.

The time is already almost over. I have been taken prisoner. They tricked me into leaving the Culturemobile. I can't believe I was so careless. The man is coming for my book.

It happened the day before yesterday. I drove into a town with barricades. It seemed empty. I left the van to refill my water jug at a well in a little park.

They came up behind me, pinned my arms, and snapped these shackles on my legs. I tried to get my gun, but they were too strong.

The chest pains were awful after they seized me. The struggle must have put too great a strain on my heart. It's angina, all right. Damn the world to hell.

I got a few bites of coarse bread today, but no water. I have had nothing to drink for twenty-four hours. At least these new people have learned how to mill wheat. A hopeful sign for the future of civilization.

Yes, that was sarcasm. Although not entirely. The man is swearing at me. He's coming.

They won't tell me what is my crime. Being an unbeliever, most likely. They have hung me in a large cage made of leather straps, secured to a lamppost in the town square. I am twelve feet above the ground, and from time to time they tie a pouch of food on a pole and heave it up to me. Just before sundown they tie the ledger book on the pole. But I have never been given more than ten minutes with my book. Sometimes, as I'm writing, onlookers pelt me with mud and dung.

I get so thirsty. The Culturemobile is parked in the square, too. It also receives its share of curses and peltings.

The man who takes back the book is not yet here. I have to say this: these new people are not insane. Primitive, narrow-minded, superstitious, dirty. But not mad. I see a lot of their comings and goings, from where I hang. It is all perfectly rational. There are never any women. Now's he's here.

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* * *

The angina is back. It seems to return whenever I think too hard. I must try to relax and save my strength. It's also very cold these days. Snow falls often, with hard frosts by sunrise. They've tossed me up some burlap, but it doesn't keep me warm.

Last night, when the streets were empty, and no stars or moon shone overhead, a young woman crept out of a house near the square and approached my cage.

"Thou are the madman?" she said in a whisper. "Is that what they call me?" I replied. "Aye," she said. "Please, I am so thirsty. Have you any water?" "Nay," she answered, "'tis closely watched. The streams here are not clean." "I'm dying of thirst." "Tarry then," she said. Next to my pole she found a small leather pouch, which the men use to pass up water to me. She opened the pouch and squatted over it, saying nothing for what seemed like a minute. Then she tied the pouch to the pole and lifted it up to my outstretched hands.

It was her urine, tepid and bitter, but I drank it gratefully.

"Thank you," I said, "but won't you be punished if you're caught out of doors?" "Nay, sir," she said, and in the dim light of the torches that ring the square, I fancied I saw a gleam in her pretty eyes. "I be a witch, they say. There be punishment fer that aplenty when they come fer me." Then, with a little laugh, she scurried away into the gloom. The man wants my book.

My witch visited me again last night, and gave me another warming drink of her personal potion. She tells me that I hang here as an example to the folk.

"In days gone by, there was madness everywhere," she said in a reverent voice. "The presbyters tell us it must never be suffered to return. Thou'rt the last madman, and thou bearest true witness to those times of troubles."

"The times have healed?" I asked.

"Aye, so they have. Fer all but madmen and witches." She laughed again, and was gone in a twinkling.

The angina grows steadily worse. A presbyter spent an hour today ranting at me in front of a large crowd of pious parishioners. It seems I will be visited by people from many towns hereabouts. I am something like the

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wild boy of Borneo in the old circus sideshows.

After his sermon, I was pelted with the usual filth, and this time, for good measure, with small stones. Some of them cut me and drew blood. My shackled legs are so feeble, I can no longer stand. Perhaps it's the meager diet. They forgot to feed me today, not for the first time. But my faithful witch stole out to me in the dead of night. I begin to look forward to her visits, and the pungent taste of her urine on my palate. Damn, the man is coming.

They did not let me write in the book for several days. I am very weak. I have a fever, and the angina pains are with me most of the time now.

This is all there will ever be, until there is not even this. I dream of Julia, but I will never see her again, or kiss her mouth, or feel the beat of her heart against my chest. I cannot cry any more.

"Behold the madman!" screams the presbyter. "Be warned against madness! Heed the Lord!"

Nothing matters but Julia. Julia. Julia. Julia. Julia. Julia. Julia.

I am a dead man. I have no skin. See the skinless man run into the night. He runs on invisible spider's legs, but he does not feel, because he is already dead. He cries out, but no one can hear him, because he has no voice. The trees pluck at his arms, but they cannot snare him, because he has no body.

He runs to Julia. But he will never find her. She lives in another universe.

Julia! Julia! I love you!

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

INTO THE HERE

EVERY ONCE in a while I overlook the obvious, and I am always grateful, at such times, if my dear wife Janet saves the situation by not overlooking it.

Not very long ago (as I write this) I received a phone call, at a little before 5 P.M., from a newspaper that wanted me to do 400 words for them on Reagan's "Star Wars" program so that they could run it on the editorial page.

"Sure," I said. "When do you want it by?"

"We need it phoned in by 3:30 P.M. tomorrow; though, if you need more time, we can squeeze out another half hour, I suppose."

That faced me with a dilemma. Janet and I were about to leave for a banquet, to be followed by a theater show, and it was quite certain we wouldn't get back till well past 11 P.M. (which means well past our bedtime). The next day was Tuesday, when I made my rounds to various editorial offices, and I usually don't get back till pretty close to 3:30 P.M.

However, I hate to say no to any reasonable writing request, so I said, cautiously, "I'll try," and hung up.

Then I went to Janet and told her the sad tale. I said, "I'll have to do it either before I go to bed or immediately after I wake up, and you will have to call them up and read them the essay some time during the day."

She looked at me out of her cool blue eyes and said, "How long will it take you to do it?"

I thought a moment. To type four hundred words would take me four or five minutes. Add a little thinking here and there, plus a little editing—

I said, "Fifteen minutes at the outside."

She looked at her watch. "We've got almost an hour before we have to leave."

"That's *right!*" I said. (That

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hadn't occurred to me.)

So I sat down, knocked off the piece, called up the newspaper, read it to them while they typed it out, and then listened as they read it back to me. We got to the banquet in plenty of time, and the essay appeared on the editorial page in due course.

When I was finished with the reading and the re-reading of the essay, by the way, I sighed with relief and said to the man at the other end of the phone, "Now you know my secret. I'm fast."

And he said, "That's no secret."

These essays for *F&SF* are just ten times as long as the newspaper piece so, at the same rate, they should take me two and a half hours. However, I'll be frank with you — these essays take a little more research per word, a little more thinking per word, and a little more editing per word, so it takes me extra time.

But the essays are worth the extra time, because they're more fun, too.

Last month, I discussed cosmic rays, which come out of the everywhere into the here. I ended the story with the 1950's, when human beings had invented particle accelerators that could produce particles every bit as energetic as most cosmic ray particles. That meant people no longer had to fool around with cosmic rays out in the field in order to get them to induce nuclear reactions that might manufacture new and unusual particles. That could be done, instead, in the comfort of the laboratory.

This is not to say that some cosmic ray particles are not more energetic than anything the accelerators of the 1950's — or of the 1980's — can produce. Indeed, the most energetic cosmic ray particles are more energetic than anything we can reasonably hope to produce in the foreseeable future — something I'll get back to later. However, the more energetic the cosmic ray particle, the rarer it is, and the less frequently it strikes the Earth.

It just wouldn't pay the nuclear physicist to wander about hoping that a super-energetic cosmic ray particle will strike his detecting device and do something extraordinary. If some super-energetics are occasionally detected by happenstance, fine, but for ordinary everyday work, it makes much more sense to deal with particles that are no more powerful than ordinary cosmic ray particles but that are produced by the trillions and can be made to strike at a known point in a known time and in a known way.

Which, of course, leaves cosmic rays still interesting in their own right.

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For instance, exactly what are cosmic ray particles? I explained last month that, in the early 1930's, it had become quite clear that they were positively charged particles. The simplest positively charged particle known at that time was the proton. The proton was stable, so it could cross cosmic distances while retaining its identity, and it was quite massive, so that if it was going at nearly the speed of light, it would surely have the energy and the penetrating power characteristic of cosmic ray particles.

Why then look any further?

Well, though the proton was the simplest stable positively charged particle known to occur, it was not the only one. There are 83 elements known to possess stable isotopes, so that there are a couple of hundred stable isotopes altogether. Every one of those isotopes has a positively charged nucleus that is stable enough to survive travel across cosmic distances, and every one of them is more massive than the proton and is likely to be even more energetic as it speeds along. Some are over two hundred times as massive as the proton.

The various nuclei do not, however, occur in the Universe in equal amounts. Little by little, astronomers learned to determine, from light spectra, the ratio of elements in the Sun, in stars, in gaseous nebulas and in galaxies. It became clear that by far the most common isotope in the Universe as a whole is hydrogen-1, the nucleus of which is a simple proton. The next most common is helium-4, the nucleus of which consists of two protons and two neutrons.

If we go by number of atoms, then about 90 percent of all the atoms in the Universe are hydrogen-1, nine percent are helium-4, and everything else makes up the other one percent or so. Of course, the helium-4 nucleus is four times as massive as the hydrogen-1 nucleus so that if we go by mass, roughly 75 percent of the mass of the Universe is hydrogen-1, 24 percent is helium-4 and, again, everything else makes up the remaining one percent.

It follows, then, that if cosmic ray particles are atomic nuclei, then the chances are that roughly 90 percent of them are hydrogen-1 (protons), nine percent are helium-4 nuclei, plus a thin scattering of a wide variety of more complicated nuclei. After all, there seems no reason to suppose that some rare isotope, say one of neodymium, ought, for some reason, be specially chosen to be fired out at great speeds while others aren't. Whatever does the firing should fire them all so that the various types of nuclei in cosmic rays ought to be,

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roughly at least, in proportion to natural occurrence.

But how can we be sure? It's all very well to reason and deduce, but nothing beats actual observation. The fact is that from Earth's surface, it is difficult to observe cosmic ray particles directly. We observe chiefly the particles that result from the smashing of the cosmic ray particles into the atoms of the atmosphere.

In the 1950's, however, we began shooting rockets above the atmosphere, and a lot of them carried instruments designed to detect cosmic ray particles and to identify their nature.

It turned out that the reasoning was right. About 98 percent of the cosmic ray particles were atomic nuclei. The other two percent were high-speed electrons. There were also a trace of antielectrons and a smaller trace of antiprotons.

Of the 98 percent that are atomic nuclei, some 87 percent are hydrogen-1 nuclei and 12 percent are helium-4 nuclei. All the others are one percent.

That certainly makes it look as though cosmic ray particles do indeed present a sampling of the Universe in general. But let's look a little more closely.

In the initial moments after the big bang, the temperature cooled to the point where the common subatomic particles formed: protons, neutrons, and electrons. As the Universe continued to cool, protons and neutrons joined to form more complicated nuclei, and then electrons began to move into the neighborhood of the nuclei and formed intact atoms.

It would seem reasonable to suppose that the numbers formed of particular atoms would decline as the complexity of their nuclei grew. In a general way, this is true and the smaller nuclei are more common than the larger ones — but this is not an exact rule.

For instance, suppose you begin with protons (hydrogen-1). A neutron combines with some of them to form hydrogen-2 nuclei. There are fewer of these than of hydrogen-1. Another neutron can add to a hydrogen-2 nucleus to form a hydrogen-3 (one proton and two neutrons), or a proton can add to a hydrogen-2 to form a helium-3 (two protons and one neutron). The hydrogen-3 is radioactive and spontaneously decays to helium-3, so we end with only helium-3. A neutron can then add to helium 3 to form helium-4 (two protons and two neutrons).

You would expect, then, that there would be a lot of hydrogen-1, less hydrogen-2, still less helium-3, and just a trace of helium-4, but

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that's not the way it works. Hydrogen-2 and helium-3 sop up neutrons very readily so that, in effect, if you start with hydrogen-1, you slide right through hydrogen-2 and helium-3 stages and end up with helium-4. As a result, you end with hydrogen-1 and helium-4 in a roughly ten to one ratio in atom numbers, while hydrogen-2 and helium-3 are present only in traces.

The helium-4 is so stable a nucleus and so reluctant to add on either a neutron or a proton that the nuclear build up after the big bang stopped there. When the first stars formed they consisted *only* of hydrogen and helium. At the center of stars, however, conditions are different than they are in space. At the center of stars, enormous pressures and densities combine with enormous temperatures to form nuclei far more complicated than that of helium. Some of these more complicated nuclei are eventually sprayed into space through supernova explosions so that later stars (like our Sun) are formed from materials that contain these complicated nuclei.

In the center of the stars, the concentration of various isotopes goes down as complexity goes up —but not perfectly. Elements 3, 4, and 5 (lithium, beryllium, and boron) form in quantity, but have a great tendency to indulge in further nuclear reactions and become elements 6, 7, and 8 (carbon, nitrogen and oxygen). For that reason, there are many more nuclei of carbon, nitrogen and oxygen in the Universe than of lithium, beryllium, and boron.

There is only one oxygen atom for every 1500 hydrogen atoms in the Universe, but even so, oxygen is the third most common element after hydrogen and helium. For every 660,000,000 oxygen atoms there are 330,000,000 carbon atoms, and 90,000,000 nitrogen atoms — but about 100 boron atoms, 11 beryllium atoms, and only five lithium atoms.

Among the cosmic ray particles, however, lithium, beryllium, and boron nuclei, while rare, are not so rare as they are in the Universe generally. These elements are anywhere from 30,000 to 1,000,000 times as common among the cosmic ray particles as they are in the Universe.

Why? The most likely reason is that as the cosmic ray particles travel across interstellar space, they occasionally collide with the sparse scattering of atoms and dust particles that are to be found there and, in so doing, they produce these rare light nuclei.

From the increase in concentration of these nuclei, it is possible to make estimates as to just how dense

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the matter is in interstellar space. Apparently, the number of particles of matter that a cosmic ray particle would encounter, on the average, in its flight across space would be about one percent of the number of particles it would encounter in just passing through our atmosphere.

It is also possible to estimate how long the cosmic rays have been flying through space, and the best value seems to be, on the average, 20 million years. Since cosmic ray particles travel at nearly the speed of light, this means that the distance they have covered is nearly 20 million light-years.

If cosmic ray particles were travelling in a straight line, they would be originating at places that, on the average, would be eight or nine times as far away as the Andromeda galaxy. However, the cosmic ray particles are electrically charged so that their paths curve slightly in response to the electromagnetic fields of the various stars they pass and to the electromagnetic field of the Galaxy as a whole. They can therefore be seen as travelling around the Galaxy, just as the stars do. The particles make some 200 circuits, on the average, before slamming into the Earth, or some other similiar object.

Energies on the subatomic level are measured in "electron-volts." One electron-volt is the energy gained by a single electron accelerated through a potential difference of one volt. This is not a large amount of energy. Some 2500 calories obtained from food would represent enough energy to keep a human being going for one day, and each of those calories is equal to 26 billion trillion electron-volts.

On the subatomic scale, though, energies in the electron-volt range are enough to hold electrons in an atom. Chemical reactions, which involve transfers of electrons from atom to atom, give off or absorb energies in the range of several electron-volts.

Particles within the nucleus are much more massive than electrons are and are held together much more tightly. The energies involved are in the millions of electron-volts. Nuclear reactions are, for that reason, more energetic than chemical reactions are, so that when a nucleus breaks down, alpha particles can be shot out with an energy of about 10 million electron-volts.

Cosmic ray particles are more energetic still. Even the lowest energy cosmic ray particles have energies of nearly one billion electron-volts. About 1000 cosmic ray particles of such comparatively low energies strike every square meter of Earth's surface every second.

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There are cosmic ray particles that are more energetic than this, but the more energetic the particles the fewer of them there are. Apparently, each time you consider a ten-fold increase in energy, the incidence of particles decreases by 300 times. Thus, if you consider cosmic ray particles of two billion electron-volts, there will be only three of these striking every square meter of Earth's surface every second.

The most energetic particles yet detected have energies of 10 million trillion electron-volts, and these are so few that only three or four strike a given square *kilometer* of Earth's surface every *year*. When one of these hits an atom in Earth's atmosphere it splatters it into a shower of a billion fragments that spray out over 100 square kilometers of Earth's surface.

Can there be still more energetic particles in existence? Very likely, but the chance of detecting them is minuscule. A particle with an energy of 30 million trillion electron-volts, three times the maximum so far detected, would strike at the rate of one per square kilometer per *century*.

The most energetic cosmic ray particles are really remarkable. The amount of energy concentrated in a *single* such particle is so great that if it could somehow be distributed as calories among the trillion trillion nuclei of our own body, it would keep us going for over half a minute.

The total energy of the cosmic ray particles traversing our Galaxy is surprisingly large. They represent an amount of energy equal to the light production of the Galaxy's stars. The question is how all that energy is concentrated into so comparatively small a mass.

Every star emits constant streams of atomic nuclei (mostly protons) in every direction. For our Sun, this is the "solar wind"; for stars generally, it is the "stellar wind."

The speeding protons of the solar wind are ordinarily far less energetic than cosmic ray particles are. However, every once in a while there is an explosion on the Sun's surface, which produces a small and temporary "solar flare" that is far more energetic than the surface of the Sun is as a rule. The solar flare sends out a pulse of protons more energetic than the solar wind generally, and some of those protons attain the energies of weak, or "soft," cosmic ray particles.

We can assume that more massive, more turbulent, and more unstable stars than the Sun produce stellar winds that are much more intense and energetic than that of

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the Sun, and that such active stars produce greater quantities of more energetic, or "harder," cosmic ray particles. Truly energetic events such as supernovas or the active centers of galaxies may produce still harder cosmic ray particles.

However, even the most energetic supernova cannot account for the upper ranges of cosmic ray particle energies.

That, however, is not in itself troublesome. The situation is analogous to that of a rocket ship. To lift off Earth, a rocket ship needs to reach the escape velocity of seven miles a second; *if* we plan to do it in one big blast to begin with and just coast upward on the force of that blast.

However, it can also be done in stages. We can give the spaceship a push that will not, in itself, send it away from Earth, but will lift it above the thickest part of the atmosphere. There, where air resistance has become minor, the portion containing the fuel for that first push falls off, and a second push gives the ship (now with a much smaller mass) another jolt. Later, there can be a third jolt.

By doing it in stages, less fuel is required to send the ship into orbit, or on its way to the Moon. Once it is in space, if it is then powered by a fuel sufficiently high in specific impulse (an ion drive, for instance), it can continue to accelerate until a speed that could never have been attained in a single push under any reasonable conditions.

Very well, then, we needn't imagine cosmic ray particles coming out of some source and attaining, to begin with, several million trillion electron-volts. Suppose they come out merely with several billion electron-volts of fairly soft cosmic rays and are then accelerated.

But how do they accelerate? They have no rocket fuel.

They are electrically charged, however, and if they pass through a magnetic field, that will accelerate them as magnetic fields accelerate particles inside a human made synchrocyclotron.

Certainly there are magnetic fields in space. The Earth has a magnetic field, Jupiter has a much stronger one, and the Sun has one that is stronger still. Some stars have a stronger field than anything in our Solar system. The Galaxy itself has a general magnetic field of its own. (All this is true of every other galaxy as well, we can be sure.)

We therefore picture cosmic ray particles being produced by energetic stars and supernovas, streaking off through a largely empty space in paths that gently curve in response to the Galactic magnetic

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field. As they curve, they accelerate and gain energy at the expense of the Galaxy generally. As they gain energy, their path straightens out, curving less under the influence of the magnetic field (which may sometimes be unusually strong), it will accelerate more sharply, bending in its path due to gravitational influence and then moving along as a considerably more energetic particle following a considerably less curved path.

Each particle accelerates in a more or less uneven fashion, but, as they all gain energy, they tend to move about the Galactic center in a generally expanding spiral until they happen to hit an object large enough and massive enough to absorb them. Those that happen *not* to hit anything for a sufficient number of millions of years gain so much energy that they scarcely curve at all in response to magnetic or gravitational fields. They move in paths that are sufficiently close to straight lines to carry them outside the Galaxy altogether and to shoot off through intergalactic space.

The really energetic cosmic ray particles that strike Earth travel in so nearly a straight line that they must have come from other galaxies in all likelihood, just as some of ours eventually reach galaxies other than our own. Sooner or later, the energy withdrawn from galaxies and used for acceleration is returned to the galaxies through collision and absorption.

From the fact that cosmic ray particles are virtually entirely normal nuclei in nature, with only the barest trace of antinuclei, we can conclude, from that alone and with a fair degree of certainty, that our Galaxy is entirely matter. From the fact that even the most energetic cosmic ray particles seem to be positively charged and not negatively charged, we can suspect that virtually the entire Universe is matter.

This requires explanation since, under ordinary circumstances, particles of matter can't be formed without the accompanying formation of equal particles of antimatter. (I took up that matter in THE CRUCIAL ASYMMETRY, F & SF, November 1981.)

The question is, though, whether we can really expect cosmic ray particles to be accelerated by magnetic fields to a sufficient extent to attain the energy levels they do, in fact, attain. The Galactic field itself is not very intense, and the chance of approaching stars closely enough to get a more intense acceleration is not very great. In fact, it does not appear that cosmic ray particles produced and accelerated in ways that astronomers in the 1960's knew

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about could possibly attain the upper reaches of energy that had been observed.

More powerful sources had to be found, or more powerful accelerations, or both.

A possible solution was reached in 1969, when pulsars were discovered and found to be reasonably common. These are condensed stars with the mass of an ordinary star but a diameter of some 15 kilometers. They rotate in anywhere from several seconds down to several thousandths of a second. The magnetic fields are as condensed as their gravitational fields are, and are enormously intense.

A charged particle emerging from a pulsar's powerfully energetic surface is an energetic particle to begin with, and the incredibly intense magnetic field would accelerate it to enormous levels of Cosmic ray particle energy at once.

However, if astronomers calculate the rate at which pulsars lose energy and slow their rotations (largely because they are radiating gravitational waves) things don't look so good. If all their loss of energy is put into the acceleration of cosmic ray particles, it would seem that even this won't account for the upper range of particle energies.

But there are certain x-ray sources consisting of binary stars. One of the pair is a condensed star, a pulsar or a black hole. The other is a normal star with from 10 to 30 times the Sun's mass.

If the normal star is expanding toward the red giant stage, it tends to have some of its mass drawn into the intense gravitational field of the condensed star. This leaking mass spirals down into the condensed star, radiating x-rays intensely as it does so.

The energy generated by this spiralling mass can be 100,000 times as intense as that delivered by our Sun.

At first, it was assumed that all this energy was radiating away as energetic photons (of x-rays, for instance). Some is, of course, but beginning in 1972, evidence began to accumulate that a good deal of the energy appeared in the form of cosmic ray particles. It is these particles, energetic enough to begin with, and enormously accelerated, that may be the source of the upper energy reaches of cosmic ray particles.

Perhaps!

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Harry Turtledove's new story is the bizarre and hilarious account of a rookie pitcher who is called up to the major leagues and befriends an odd threesome with foreign-sounding names . . .

Batboy

By Harry Turtledove

Boston
September 3, 191-

Dear Willie,

YOU'LL SEE BY by the address and the picture that was took of me the other day what has happened. Sure enough the Browns has bought my contract and I am in the BIGS at last! The way I found out was like this. I had just finished shutting out Knoxville when old Charlie told me the owner wanted to tell me somthin. I thot I was in dutch again especially when he ups & says Rip we're gonna have to get rid o you this time. But he had a grin and a train ticket & so here I am.

They is all dam yankees up here excepting some of the ballplayers. The country is pretty but its full of rocks. They do feed you good. I have had scrod which is almost as good as catfish.

I have a roommate for the hotel. His name is Laszlo Kovacs or some

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bohunk thing like that. Hes a rook too up from Syracuse. He plays second mostly. Not a bad fellow I guess. Dont say much tho. Well I can talk enuf for two as you has told me before this.

Got to stop now. They is yelling for me to go down to this Fenway Park where the Red Sox are at. It is a nice place to play. Pass my love on to Ma and say Hello to Sally for me. I wouldnt ask you to do that if you wasnt married, & my Brother. Show her the picture of me in my uniform if you get the chance.

Your loving brother,
Rip (a big leaguer even if it is the Browns)

Boston
September 4, 191-

Dear Willie,

Well, I must say they surely do things backards in this American League. I got me the chance to pitch yesterday on account of the Red Sox was hitting line drives off everybody what stuck his head out the dugout. So the mgr says Come on kid get loose lets see what you can do. I did & he stuck me in figuring since they had us down 10-3 I couldnt make things no worse.

So in I come & just to keep me interested its 2nd & 3rd & no outs. I popped up the 1st fellow I pitched to & the next one hits right back to me. This is easy Im thinking cause the next spot is the pitcher. Big lefty name of George Somethin — a girl's name I think. Well he hit my curve like he knew it was comin & winds up on 3rd with a big grin on his ugly mug. Then I get the leadoff man. Which is why I say this is a backards league. The pitchers hit & the hitters dont.

Come to that the Browns are backards too. They do not do too poor at first & then get weaker & weaker as the season goes along. Lazlo or however you spell it was talkin about that with a newspaper fellow in the hotel last night. Fellow's name is Gyula Nagy so I guess he is a bohunk too. In fact I know he is. Part of the time they was using to bohunk lingo which sounds like nothin I have heared before I can tell you.

This Gyula has a son called Zoltan which is a heathen sounding name if ever I heared one. Because his Pa travels with the team & all they let him wear a little uniform & fetch balls & bats around & the like. An alright little tyke I think tho my roomie didnt rightly take to him. I will

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say he is funny looking with just the one eyebrow growing acrost his forehead like that.

We go to New York next. I will rite you from there.

Your Brother,
Rip

P.S. — Remember none of the runs what scored counted against me on account of they was on base already when I come in.

New York
September 7, 191-

Dear Willie,

I thot the towns in the Southern Assn was big this year till I seen Boston but I can tell you this New York makes Boston look like Opelousas back home beside it. Every kind of furriner lives here & I think a few yankees too. No I dont mean the baseball team tho they been giving us fits since we got in town.

Well they might cause we is into our September Swoon which is what that Gyula fellow calls it but you got to remember he is a riter. This Polo Grounds where the Yankees I mean the baseball ones this time play has fences even shorter down the line than Sulphur Dell in Nashville. But could we reach em? Not a prayer of it. Never did you see so many little squibs and pops in all your born days.

We is dead on the field too. Balls that should ought to be caut or picked up easy go thru which makes the pitchers cuss. But they aint throwin hard either it looks like to me. Maybe I'll get some work on account of it.

About the bounciest thing on the whole team is that Zoltan which I told you about in my last letter. He was kind of sollemlike in Boston but has perked up remarkable on the train ride south. Its a caution to see him jumpin & carryin on in the dugout. His little cheeks is just as red as a couple of boiled crawdads. Funny I didnt spy that before.

Will close now as Laszloo which as you can see I still dont ritely know how to spell is taking me to a bohunk restaurant he found out about some ways. I would sooner have grits but cant find em up here.

Again pass on my love to Ma & affecktion to Sally. For you too now as I think of it.

Your Brother,
Rip

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* * *

New York
September 8, 191-

Dear Willie.

Now that I have ate bohunk food I see why they was so eager to cross the ocean & come over here to get away from it is why. The stuffed cabbage was not too bad & there was beer to wash it down but what is done to pork chops is a caution I tell you. You could smell em coming before they was out of the kitchen they had that much garlic on em. I was a blame fool to let Laslo order for me.

Well even he made heavy going. My eyes was watering fit to kill as I made shift to eat em. If Ma hadnt always taut me to clean my plate I would of gived up after the 1st bite. Ma never tried eating these tho which is lucky for her. I like to died.

When we got back to the hotel we stunk up the lobby good. Two of our ballplayers who was in there lit up cheroots & I mean big ones the second we walked in. Between the smoke & us a sweet young thing which had been makin eyes at Doc our shortstop passed out altogether. It was what they call a sensation.

Just then Gyoola and his boy Zoltan come out of the elevator. I went over to say Hello thinking as how bein bohunks their own selves they wouldnt mind what I smell like. & Gyoola does say Hello nice as you please. But Zoltan his eyes rolled up in his head & for a second I thot he was going to faint like the lady if thats what she was. Then he kind of run away from me. I dont think his Pa knew what to make of it & I surely didnt. Laslo his eyes got very big but he didnt say nothin.

Here is another funny thing. A good half a dozen of the fellows on the team say they seen a bat flapping round their winders in the middle of the night. Me I call that rite peculiar on account of bats not much favoring towns & especially not one the size of New York.

I didnt see no bats. This morning I turned to Laslo and said Probably we scared em away the way we stunk last nite. & without batting an eye which is a joke I guess he says Probably. These furriners & almost furriners is peculiar people.

Love to you & Ma,
Rip

P.S. — I will be home in time to help with the harvest so dont you worry.

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* * *

New York
September 9, 191-

Dear Willie,

Well it was a big day for this here hotel room yesterday. Lazlo got to start when Del our reglar 2nd baseman turned up sick. I dont know what was rong with him but he was pale as a fishbelly. You could see the spot where he must of cut hisself shaving under his chin just like a coal on a snowbank. I hope it aint catchin.

But about Lazlo. He sure dont seem tired. He got 2 hits & stole a base & was robbed another time & played good in the field. We lost again 2-1 but it was not his fault.

Nor mine neither. The mgr throwed me in in the 5th when we was down 2-0 already but had 2 men on so he batted for Grover who started. Not that it helped on account of the pinch batter hit into a double play. But I pitched 4 innings & did not give up a run & would have got a win if our hitters had been good for anything.

Which reminds me of somethin that right ticked me off. Remember how I said the other day how Zoltan would hop around & cheer for us in his little Brownie suit? Well he didnt do no cheerin for Lazlo even tho they is both bohunks. Means he was quiet all day seein as how the rest of em didnt do nothin like I said.

After the game I says somewhat to Lazlo about it but he dont seem the least bit fazed. He says his rootin I can do without. You make heads or tails of it for I cannot.

Your Brother,
Rip

Detroit
September 11, 191-

Dear Willie,

Seems as how Lazlo & Gyoola & Zoltan is filling up all my letters but there has been another dustup among em since I rote you last. The latest hoorah commenced on the train between New York and here. It might not of happened if Lazlo had not got hisself likkered up. He is fond of whiskey but not much for holding it.

I had a few myself but having started on corn squeezins no store-

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bought whiskey can shift me which I know you will understand. I was takin Lazlo back to our Pullman when who shd we run into but Gyoola. My roomie like to spit in his eye. He rears back & comes out with Do you know what kind of unnatural monster your son is?

Your drunk says Gyoola which was true & Your crazy which I did not think too far off either. But Lazlo goes Crazy am I & shouts something in that furrin tongue o theirs. Gyoola gapes at him like a new-caut fish & says You are crazy sharper this time. But Lazlo comes back in that old country lingo & pretty soon they was slangin each other for all they was worth if the noise ment anything. I wish I knew what they was sayin cause it sounded lively.

Then Lazlo ups & swings on him which proves Gyoola was rite on account of Gyoola would make 3 of him. I give him credit Gyoola didnt swing back he is a gentleman. I got my arms round my roomie at last & hauled him to bed.

By the time he was in the bunk he got the upper this trip he had went from fightin drunk to cryin drunk carryin on about how Gyoola is a fine fellow but deseeved & changelings & I dont know what all. His yarns what I could make out of em is wilder than anything I ever heered old Jacob tell who was a slave before the States War.

Well when I climbed into the lower they was somethin in the bed with me. I thot it was roaches but it was cloves of garlic I found when I pulled one out. I says How did this get here & Lazlo answers back I put em there & you leave em. I want no truck with your heathen superstishun I says & do you know what he does next? He hands me down a crucifix like the Papists use and says Take this then. Thank you I will keep the garlic I tell him & he shuts up.

More of the team is down with whatever it is Del has. If it hadnt come on so sudden Id call it hookworm. They are all washed out & listless like people with the worm suckin on em. But I heered somewheres the yankee parts o the country dont have hookworm so it cant be that.

It is a terrible thing to happen to us because with Ty & Wahoo Sam & the rest the Tigers whale the ball against the best of teams & how are we supposed to stay with em with half the players sick & the rest draggin? If we lose they will blame the pitchers they always do.

Love to you & Ma & your Kate,
Your Brother Rip

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P.S. — Got your telegram in New York. I am glad to hear Sally says she is proud of me.

Detroit
September 12, 191-

Dear Willie,

I am commencing to wonder if maybe I am the crazy one & not Laszlo after all. It is on account of what I seen or rather didnt see in the hotel this morning. It is a fine place much fancier than the ones we stayed at in Boston or New York. One wall of the lobby is a mirror I suppose to make it seem bigger then it is not that it needs to because it dont.

We come in erly in the morning draggin our tails some because tho you can sleep in a Pullman its not near as good as a bed. Players & reporters & such was mingled with porters totin our bags & a few o what the Reverend would call scarlet wimmin. You neednt mention them last to Ma or Sally either.

Anyways to make a long story short while we was all checkin in & the clerks was yellin for bellhops & the like I happen to look round in the mirror to see if my new Panama which you must see was strait on my head. It was but what should I spy in the glass but a little boys suit without a little boy in it if you take my meaning. There was nothin like that in our crowd only Zoltan smiling at me. His teeth is uncommon white & long & sharp. Like I say he was smilin but not real frendly like I didnt think.

I says If that dont beat all & point out what I seen to Laslo who was standing by me cause were roomies as you recollect. & he looks too & dam me if his eyes dont near roll back in his head. But when he catches Zoltan lookin our way he makes out like everything is alright. Hes good. Remember me not to play poker against him.

Nobody else seemed to notice nothin amiss.

When we was up in our room Laslo rounds on me & says This is the last proof now do you see what sort of feind it is? It is a vampire. What on earth is that I ask & he tells me more then I bargined for. Seems this vampire crechur is a kind o bloodsuckin hant the bohunks has which ifn you fail to kill itll leech a man to death.

We got to kill it Laslo says all rile up. I says Well that may be a good idear but how do you aim to go about it? It dont sound easy from what he

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says & I know from old Jacob as how hants is never easy to be rid of. But bein a bohunk hisself Laslo has a skeme which may work.

I hope so. The Browns is ragged enuf with all the blood in em and purely hopeless without. The Tigers done trounced us today & look like doin it again tomorrow. We had 3 reglars out o the lineup. This has got to stop so I am with Laslo all the way tho there is likely to be some risk. But no hant is a match for a good Southern man. I will tell you how we done in my next letter.

Love to you from yr Brother
Rip

P.S. — If this goes rong give the picture of me in uniform to Sally to remember me by. Dont read this part to Ma. The more I think the scareder I get.

Detroit
September 14, 191-

Dear Willie,

The Lord be praised the deed is like they say done. Laszlo & I is well tho the ting turned out much more tighter than either one of us reckoned it wld. What we done was take down all the garlic & other heathen charms Laszlo been usin to keep the hant away and the crucifix too & wait for it or rather Zoltan I mean to pay us a call. Nite before last he didnt either on account of he suspected a snare or because he was eatin somewheres else. The whole team is so peaked these days I couldnt cipher out which ones was fed on last.

Well we left the hoodoos down again last nite & sat up waiting for whatever was going to happen. We did not want to be caut napping for sure! As we had done this the nite before too & slept a little of the day, I confess I was yawnin.

Then lookin out the winder I seen the bat what had been seen round before. I reckon thats what it was anyways for it seen me too & flied closer. I just had time to give Laszlo the sign & let him get out of sight longside the winder afore it come up.

I dont quite know how to tell what happened next. I was lookin into its eyes & its like I heered a voice in my head sayin Let me in let me in. & I couldnt of said No even if I wanted to which at the time I didnt. That vampire hant charmed me with them red opticks of its just like a snake

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charmin a bird down out of a tree for it to swaller.

Laszlo said after I was like a machine when I up & opened the winder. I dont hardly recollect one way or the other. All I remember is them eyes. In my head I heered that voice again Give me your neck it was sayin. & I twisted my chin to one side like a shote which dont know its about to be slaughtered.

Then its like there was a scream only it werent a noise at all only in between my ears. Laszlo had sprung out from where he was hidin & landed the hant a smart one with his crucifix. We didnt know what that would do neither him or me but we found out right quick. They was a thump a real one this time & insted of the bat at my neck there was Zoltan on the floor naked as the day he was born only I reckon he werent born at all when you think about it.

He was still part hant tho. I had thunk his teeth was long before well now he had a set the bobcat we ketched last winter would of been proud of. He was smilin like a wild crechur & I got to tell you them eyes still dragged at me somethin fierce.

Not at Laszlo. I reckon the cross saved him. Maybe them Catholics is not as rong as we think. Anyways he hauls out a railroad spike and slams it into Zoltan's chest. I heard that shreek again in my mind & I reckon in Laszlo's too on account of his hands was shakin but he did not let go. He shoved that spike in harder & deeper.

Zoltan's mouth was open so wide I thot itd go clean round to the back of his head. I was moving like a man in a dream still but when Laszlo cussed at me I done the last thing we planned out which was fling a whole garlic down his I mean Zoltan's trap. I dont know if that shifted him or the spike but then he give a last riggle & his eyes well if they was lamps youd say they was blowed out. All a sudden I was alrite again.

Laszlo & me the both of us yelled then on account of it wasnt no little boy on the spike any more but a bat the same size Zoltan had been & just as dead too. & then the bat melted away like snow in a thaw & there was nothin on the rug excepting the spike which Laszlo had dropped & the garlic.

So its done I reckon. I wish I cld sleep for a week but we got a game tomorrow. I bet we whup em too.

Your Brother safe & sound,
Rip

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* * *

Detroit
September 15, 191-

Dear Willie,

Well whup em we didnt I am afraid. The Tigers they is a good team & that Ty runs & hits like a madman & you cant pitch around him either or Sam or Bobby will kill you if he dont. So we lost again.

But the boys which was most bloodsucked are looking better & so I have no douts things will get better soon. & heres a funny thing. Nobody remembers nothin about Zoltan & what he was doing to em but for me & Lazslo.

Come to that nobody remembers nothin about Zoltan at all. Lazslo & me we run into Gyula at breakfast & was not sure what to say or nothin. Finally Lazslo asks him Hows your son & he looks at my roomie like he was off his head & says I aint got no son nor never did. Lazslo & me look at each other & press it no farther I can tell you.

& you remember how Zoltan was in the dugout with us & all? Well his little uniform is plumb disappeared & nobody knows where it has gone nor misses it neither. When I ask the mgr What become of the batboy he gives me the same look Gyula done gave Lazslo & says This team aint never had no batboy.

Thats what you think I say But dont worry he done flied out for the last time. & I laughs and laughs even tho hes reamin me up one side & down the other. Sometimes there aint no point in tellin people things anyhow is all I can say.

Your loving Brother,
Rip

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FILMS

HARLAN ELLISON'S WATCHING

Interim Apologia 31½: *In Which Mea Culpas Fall Like Gentle Rain Upon the Place Beneath*

YOU ARE deserving of an explanation.

As is said, life's a bitch, and then you die. The past six months have been a killer. There was the Writers Guild strike, meaning no money was coming in, there was less than salutary health, there was a crush of deadlines on books and articles and stories and . . .

Look: you've got troubles, too. You don't need to hear my problems. But somewhichway you've come to enjoy these outings of ours, and Ed Ferman is going nuts because I've missed two issues and damned near missed this one, as well; and he's tearing out his hair. With justification. I don't *mean* to miss deadlines, but after a number of years during which working *at all* was close to impossible — ask me about Chronic Epstein-Barr Virus sometime, and I'll tell you a tale that makes suicide look attractive — I'm back at the typewriter full time, and the books and stories and movies are flowing again. But now I have to catch up. You remember THE LAST DANGEROUS VISIONS, don't you? Well, that's just one of the projects that's coming through the pipeline, despite all attempts by slugs like Chris Priest to convince the world (and TLDV's contributors) that it'll never see print.

So I get up at five ayem, and I write all day, and the work is appearing. It's been ten crummy years, with not much hope I'd be able to get into the clear. Now, as Charles Foster Kane said, I have something more than hope. It seems reasonable to assume that everything promised, from TLDV to the novel based on "A Boy and his Dog" *will* reach completion. But the wind is up, and everyone to whom I owe a book or a

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story or a column — from Stu Schiff to *Playboy* — wants what's due *now*.

I'm dancing as fast as I can.

These columns, which I write with more pleasure than anything else I'm doing these days, sometimes get shunted aside for today's most horrific crisis. And you deserve an apology, and an explanation. The latter you've just gotten; the former is expressed quite simply as a little gift that forms the core of this interim piece: here are a batch of movies either just released or forthcoming that you surely *must* see.

THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST
BETRAYED
TUCKER
ROCKET GIBRALTER
EIGHT MEN OUT
GORILLAS IN THE MIST
ANOTHER WOMAN
WITHOUT A CLUE

This may seem a fast-fix way to buy your forbearance, but Installment 32, which is about *Roger Rabbit* and *Willow*, is sitting here nearly finished, and I need peace and quiet to do it right; so I've attempted to bail myself out, to give Ed a stop-gap piece so you'll know everything is actually okay in Mudville, and to save you some money by recommending recent films I've caught that I think you'll want to catch yourselves . . . in hopes that you will perceive the hysteria of a work-schedule too full for any normal human being, not to mention a basket-case like your devoted columnist. Because you've come to relish these columns, and because I've come to like you a whole lot. M—I—C, K—E—Y . . . no, that's something else.

Mea goddam maxima, folks. If all goes well, and the crick don't rise, I'll endeavor not to miss another deadline for at least a year. Or to put it another way:

Sat ci sat bene. Latin for: "It is done quickly enough if it is done well."

Mercy, he cried. Mercy. Until next month.

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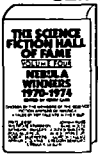

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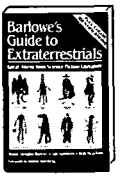

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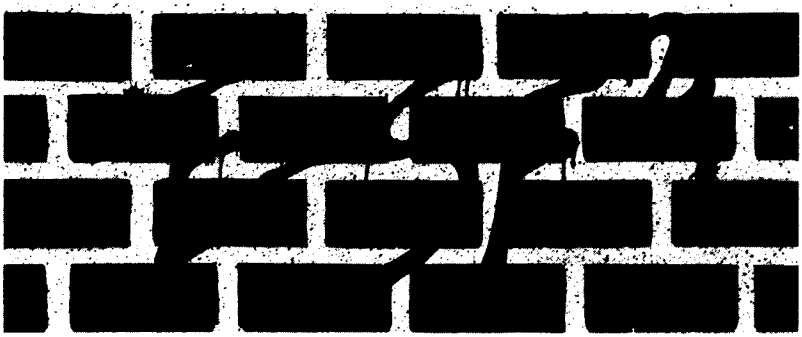

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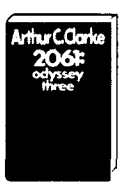

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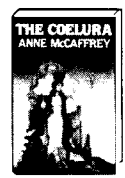

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